

## Altering (Dynamic) Social Ideologies through the Exercise of Free Speech

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A democratic structure founded on the principle of freedom of speech and action necessarily embraces the rhetorical tensions between narratives/counter-narratives. This exchange yields a political structure that by nature accepts the possibility of conflict as ever-present because of varying standpoints. This paper addresses the structure and construction of political ideology, leveraging space inherent within an ideograph allowing for a possible change in meaning of the ideology, and the use of narrative/counter-narrative in free speech to break open ideologies. A brief examination of the conversation between “Joe the Plumber” and Barack Obama during the 2008 presidential campaign illustrates the discussion.

### Political Ideology

The political belief structures of society frequently take the form of an ideology. In the United States, the two primary political ideologies that prevail are liberalism and conservatism. In the current historical moment, the rhetoric and social action of persons rarely meets the ideological constraints of a strict liberal or conservative ideology – we have moved, as Anthony Giddens notes, *Beyond Left and Right*.<sup>1</sup> Yet we continue to draw upon ideologies as a practical aid to assist in communication with others.

Dennis K. Mumby recognized that an ideology “invokes a complex system of power structures that inscribe and position individuals in particular ways and with certain constraints and possibilities on their activities.”<sup>2</sup> To a certain extent we are constrained by our ideologies because of the requirements of what is “natural,” not just our “role” or “duty.” In discussing ideology and communication Dan F. Hahn explains, “We are taught ... that the institutions of society are permanent; that, moreover, they have been tested by ancestors wiser than we are and found to be good and moral and right and efficacious and a hundred other wonderful things.” Every day a person encounters the varying anomalies and discontinuities of the social ideology to which one adheres, yet they are seldom recognized or acted upon. Most of us, Hahn explains, “are more likely to loosen our grip on the political ideology than to conclude that our own lives are flawed.”<sup>3</sup>

Words within an ideology control how we can think about any phenomenon – the language predisposes us toward a particular analysis of a situation in line with meaning structures that comprise the ideology. Further, in an era driven by what Alasdair MacIntyre calls “emotivism,”<sup>4</sup> we can recognize the influence of emotion on the interpretation of decisions undergirded by ideological constructs. For example, people lined up on both sides of the issue when Terry Jones, pastor of a small church in Gainesville, Florida, recently announced plans to burn the Quran – either for or against Jones’s proposed action. When New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg spoke about the controversy, he was seen as being “at it again,” having recently supported the right to build Cordoba House mosque in lower Manhattan. Bloomberg said, “I don’t think he [Jones] would like it if somebody burnt a book that in his religion he thinks is holy. But the First Amendment protects everybody and you can’t say that we’re going to apply the First Amendment to only those cases where we are in agreement.”<sup>5</sup> Pointing to the political documents that guide our nation, Bloomberg offered a textured response that disagreed with Jones’s actions on moral ground and supported Jones’s actions on legal ground – all under the guise of his “right” to do so.

Both sides in any public debate might use the same term, yet hold very different meanings for that term which would lead them to vehemently disagree with one another. The culturally significant concept of “freedom” is such a term. While conservatives seek freedom *from* government control, liberals argue for freedom *through* government control.

Liberal and conservative ideologies include elements of the broader American democratic ideology. Dan F. Hahn explains, “Most of these concepts are such vague abstractions, yet so commonly accepted as ‘right,’ that most of the time we are not even aware that belief in them constitutes an ideology, much less that they provide the bases of our societal belief system.”<sup>6</sup> Michael Calvin McGee notes that we divide ourselves into subgroups, based on the meaning of terms for us: “business and labor, Democrats and Republicans, Yankees and Southerners are *united* by the ideographs that represent the political entity ‘United States’ and *separated* by a disagreement as to the practical meaning of such ideographs.”<sup>7</sup> Broad abstractions in the American democratic ideology (including tolerance, the presumption of equal opportunity, equal treatment in both the public and private domains, and so forth) provide the semantic space for citizens to challenge interpretations in a political ideology.

### *Space Within The Ideograph*

Michael Calvin McGee, in his work “The ‘Ideograph’: A Link between Rhetoric and Ideology” asserts:

“If we are to describe the trick-of-the-mind which deludes us into believing that we ‘think’ with/through/for a society’ to which we ‘belong,’ we need a theoretical model which accounts for both ‘ideology’ and ‘myth,’ a model which neither denies human capacity to control ‘power’ through manipulation of symbols nor begs Marx’s essential questions regarding the influence of ‘power’ on creating and maintaining political consciousness.”<sup>8</sup>

McGee encourages readers to examine uses of “ideographs,” or significant terms that define the parameters of a community or collectivity.

Ideographs “appear in public discourse primarily as a means of warranting or justifying otherwise troubling or problematic acts of collective power.” An ideograph is not an abstract, universal, timeless ideal. The meaning of an ideographic term (e.g., liberty) is created by discourse within a particular society, distorted by local use in different contexts, specific to a given rhetorical culture. Ideographs constitute the substance of any social group by guiding the social actions that members of the collectivity who subscribe to the ideograph can engage. As people exercise their right to free speech and culture changes, the meaning of the ideograph will also change.<sup>9</sup>

Michael Calvin McGee explains that in everyday practice, ideology is a political language “composed of sloganlike terms signifying collective commitment.”<sup>10</sup> With regard to normative commitments, the illusion of truth and falsity is the product of persuasion. “Since the clearest access to persuasion (and hence to ideology) is through the discourse used to produce it,” McGee suggests ideology is

“preserved in rhetorical documents, with the capacity to dictate decision and control public belief and behavior ... [through] interpenetrating systems of ‘structures’ of public motives. Such structures appear to be ‘diachronic’ and ‘synchronic’ patterns of political consciousness which have the capacity both to control ‘power’ and to influence (if not determine) the shape and texture of each individual’s ‘reality.’”<sup>11</sup>

As humans we are conditioned to respond to a vocabulary of concepts that provide warrants, give reasons or excuses, and act as guides to our thoughts/words/deeds. When a claim is warranted by the law, for example, the state presumes that humans will act predictably, without discussion of the grounds for conformity in the way people act. McGee writes, “We make a rhetoric of war to persuade us of war’s necessity, but then forget that it is a rhetoric—and regard negative popular judgments of it as unpatriotic cowardice.”<sup>12</sup> Yet, ideographs are pregnant with possibility for reinterpretation of meaning. People experience and create lived narratives in line

with, or against, ideologies. The interpretive space within ideographs allow change to be introduced into the ideology. One way to do this is through narrative.

### **Public Narrative**

A narrative defines a coherent world within which social action occurs. Social scripts are dependant not only on the narrators who find the script meaningful enough to reproduce, but also on the audiences that will listen to and accept the scripts. Walter R. Fisher's *Human Communication as Narration* addresses how narratives are shaped and shape people's lives and our broader society.<sup>13</sup>

As people gain information through education and travel, they become aware of other 'truths' that direct one to emphasize different facets of an ideology and guide one's ways of living. One may begin to experience internal and external conflict as incongruities appear within the flux of ideographs. In discussing creative conflict, Wilson Jeremiah Moses recognizes

*"First, we all experience internal conflicts because every person's attitudes and dispositions vary unsystematically according to time and circumstance; second, we experience conflicts between our own thoughts and those of other persons with whom we supposedly identify; third, ... we experience pragmatic contradictions between our professed beliefs and our actual behavior."*<sup>14</sup>

Ideographs/key terms can shift in meaning as we interpret various life situations, revealed to us in narratives.

Counter-narratives are stories that offer resistance, either implicitly or explicitly, to dominant cultural narratives. A counter-narrative adheres to the principles of the narrative paradigm, yet evidences a tension within or toward the dominant (master, prevailing) narrative—the 'normative' experience. When a person's experiences do not match the dominant narrative he or she must find meaning outside of the scripts that are ordinarily available. This requires changing the emplotment of scripts.

People may consciously construct personal stories that go against the dominant narrative. These stories are not considered to be 'unique,' but rather are situated on the margin(s) of the dominant narrative. The boundaries of the mainstream are defined by the marginality of outgroups, whose voice and perspective has been suppressed, devalued, and abnormalized.<sup>15</sup>

Resistance to dominant narratives occurs when listeners are faced with arguments that do not resonate with the meanings in their lived-experience: audiences may be unaware of a problem, refuse to admit that a problem exists, believe that the problem does not require drastic action, or they may be optimistic about the future. Established orders (such as religious organizations, social organizations, and professional organizations) foster and reinforce dominant narrative perceptions to guide one's speech and action. Counter-narratives must alter the ways an audience perceives the past, the present, and the future to convince them that an intolerable situation exists and that urgent action is warranted.<sup>16</sup> The resistant other is accounted for through narrative inquiry while at the same time narrative evokes the defiant speech of the other.<sup>17</sup>

Richard Thames noted, "rhetoricians are wary of resisting change, fearful that doing so may lead to stagnation. But they are also wary of it, fearful of turbulence that often trails in its wake." Charged with the necessity of conducting the public's business, politicians rely on temporal and local 'truths' to guide their conduct and decision-making.<sup>18</sup> Freedom of speech and expression is fundamental to constructing, maintaining, and altering a democratic society.

Eric S. Knowles and Jay A. Linn assert that narratives can be a useful strategy in challenging strong attitudes (or McGee might say, ideographs) that are most resistant to change.<sup>19</sup> They cite the work of M. D. Slater, who asserts narratives are one of the only strategies available for influencing the beliefs of those who are

predisposed to disagree with the position espoused in the persuasive message.<sup>20</sup> Narratives are value-added; as such, they provide an added dimension to the logical reasoning process. A narrative structure is seen as less threatening than a directly persuasive attempt. The more delicate the issue – especially given the high level of emotional appeals in contemporary culture – the more likely a person is to discuss their position at length so that their exact position will be lucid to the audience.<sup>21</sup> A counter-narrative may be in strong opposition to a dominant narrative, or it may initiate narrative change by including a counter-message within the dominant narrative. Counter-narratives (or dominant narrative with a counter message nested within it) overcome resistance by introducing values that diminish the effectiveness of the logic within a dominant narrative.

Within the play of censorship laws, slander and libel laws, laws governing commercial speech, and so forth, there is room for discussion and debate on the interpretation of key words that shape ideas. The use of narratives undergirds *and* can change the meaning of ideographs and shift common understanding of ideologies.

### *Seeking to Change the Meaning of Ideographs through Narrative*

Samuel Wurzelbacher (a.k.a., “Joe the Plumber”) became a popular figure during the 2008 presidential election when he questioned candidate Barack Obama about the proposed small business tax policy. Wurzelbacher suggested that Obama’s tax plan would be inconsistent with supporting “the American dream.”

During the brief (5 minute, 46 second) exchange that took place in an Ohio neighborhood, Wurzelbacher mentioned buying a company that would make more than \$250,000 annually. He noted Obama’s new tax plan, which would increase taxes on earnings between \$250,000 to \$300,000 annually. Obama replied with information about the tax credit for health care and the need to increase taxes for those earning above \$250,000 to give a tax cut to people who make less than \$250,000. Wurzelbacher defined a tax increase on business profit above \$250,000 as inconsistent with his understanding of the American dream: “I’m getting taxed for fulfilling the American dream.” Obama responded that he appreciated the long hours that Wurzelbacher works and that 95% of Americans make less than \$250,000 – making an “average wage and income for just, ordinary folks, the vast majority of Americans, are working hard too and should be taxed less.” Obama indicated the plan was not to “punish your success” but to make sure that people who earn less “have got a chance at success, too.”

Samuel Wurzelbacher introduced the ideology of the American dream (interwoven with other ideologies) and Obama’s responded by also privileging that ideology. American writer and historian James Truslow Adams is credited with crafting the phrase “American dream” in *Epic of America*:

“The American Dream is that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, also too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.”<sup>22</sup>

This ethos for this idea is drawn from the Declaration of Independence, which states that “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Jennifer L. Hochschild encapsulated “the ideology of the American dream – the faith that an individual can attain success and virtue through strenuous effort – is the very soul of the American nation.”<sup>23</sup>

In their conversation, Samuel Wurzelbacher and Barack Obama shared the ideology of the American Dream, a national ethos in the United States in which freedom includes the promise of prosperity and success.

Wurzelbacher emphasized the American dream, working long hours, building the company, and getting taxed more and more for his hard work. Obama's comments responded within the spirit of the American dream, addressing a tax credit for health care, a tax increase for businesses on annual income between \$250,000-\$300,000, success, luck, and emphasizing a society inclusive of all citizens. Wurzelbacher and Obama's shared ideology drew out ideographs such as "work" and synonyms for a "better," "richer," "fuller" life. However, the narratives that were conveyed fleshed out the ideographs differently. Wurzelbacher emphasized individualism while Obama emphasized collectivism – "everybody" including "the waitress [Obama] just met." Obama vocalized that there was "one way of looking at it" and also "another way of looking at it."<sup>24</sup>

While neither person persuaded the other that day, the national conversation included "Joe the Plumber" for several months, attesting to the possibility of opening the conversation by (re-)interpreting the meaning of significant symbols/ideographs in the conversation. Attending to the other person and listening to narratives allows one a foothold to reinterpret ideographs and thus change one interpretations of everything from a tax proposal to a broader a societal direction.

### **Closing**

An ideology is a dynamic rather than a static entity. As such, the ideology is susceptible to change. The introduction of narratives that attest to lived-experience can alter the interpretation of ideographs, the building blocks of an ideology. The use of free speech and a free press provide the opportunity to work together to make decisions about the conduct of human affairs.

This paper overviewed the structure of political ideology, noting that the space within the ideograph can enable a speaker to reflexively invoke change in meaning of the ideology by using narrative/ counter-narrative. Free speech can break open ideologies that have become sedimented over time. *Disputatio*, a traditional means of seeking truth through the use of contradictions, and the traditions of dialogue and debate provide a means for citizens to struggle over ideological contradictions, strengthen their critical thinking skills, and engage in the public construction of democracy through the exercise of free speech.

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Anthony Giddens. *Beyond Left and Right: The Future of Radical Politics*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1994. See also Kenneth H. Tucker, Jr. *Anthony Giddens and Modern Social Theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Dennis K. Mumby. "Ideology and the Social Construction of Meaning: A Communication Perspective." *Communication Quarterly* 37 (Fall 1989), p. 303.

<sup>3</sup> Dan F. Hahn. *Political communication: Rhetoric, government, and citizens*. State College, PA: Strata Publishing, 1998, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. West Bend, IN: U of Notre Dame P, 1981/1984, see pp. 23-35.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Howard Saul. "Bloomberg Defends Pastor's Right to Burn the Quaran." *Wall Street Journal: Digital Network*. Sept. 8, 2010. <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704358904575478241873665072.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Dan F. Hahn. *Political Communication: Rhetoric, Government, and Citizens*. State College, PA: Strata Publishing, 1998, pp. 17-18.

<sup>7</sup> McGee, Michael Calvin. "The 'Ideograph': A Link between Rhetoric and Ideology." *Contemporary Rhetorical Theory: A Reader*. Eds. John Louis Lucaites, Celeste Michelle Condit, and Sally Caudill. New York: Guilford Press, 1999, p. 430.

<sup>8</sup> McGee, Michael Calvin. "The 'Ideograph': A Link between Rhetoric and Ideology." *Contemporary Rhetorical Theory: A Reader*. Eds. John Louis Lucaites, Celeste Michelle Condit, and Sally Caudill. New York: Guilford Press, 1999, pp. 425-440. First published in *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 66 (1980): 1-16. see p. 427.

<sup>9</sup> John Louis Lucaites, Celeste Michelle Condit, and Sally Caudill. "The Role of Discourse in Social Change." *Contemporary Rhetorical Theory: A Reader*. Eds. John Louis Lucaites, Celeste Michelle Condit, and Sally Caudill. New York: Guilford Press, 1999, p. 383.

<sup>10</sup> McGee, Michael Calvin. "The 'Ideograph': A Link between Rhetoric and Ideology." *Contemporary Rhetorical Theory: A Reader*. Eds. John Louis Lucaites, Celeste Michelle Condit, and Sally Caudill. New York: Guilford Press, 1999, p. 435.

<sup>11</sup> McGee, Michael Calvin. "The 'Ideograph': A Link between Rhetoric and Ideology." *Contemporary Rhetorical Theory: A Reader*. Eds. John Louis Lucaites, Celeste Michelle Condit, and Sally Caudill. New York: Guilford Press, 1999, p. 427.

<sup>12</sup> McGee, Michael Calvin. "The 'Ideograph': A Link between Rhetoric and Ideology." *Contemporary Rhetorical Theory: A Reader*. Eds. John Louis Lucaites, Celeste Michelle Condit, and Sally Caudill. New York: Guilford Press, 1999, p. 428.

<sup>13</sup> Walter R. Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989.

<sup>14</sup> Moses, Wilson Jeremiah. *Creative Conflict in African American Thought: Frederick Douglass, Alexander Crummell, Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. DuBois, and Marcus Garvey*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2004. p. xiii.

<sup>15</sup> Andrews, M. (2002). Introduction: Counter-narratives and the power to oppose. *Narrative Inquiry*, 12, 1-6.

<sup>16</sup> Stewart, Charles J. "A Functional Approach to the Rhetoric of Social Movements." *Central States Speech Journal*, 31 (1980): 298-305. Stewart, Charles J. "A Functional Perspective on the Study of Social Movements." *Central States Speech Journal*, 34 (1983): 77-80.

<sup>17</sup> Burnett, B. "Theorising of the Other Talking Back." *Narrative Inquiry*, 13 (2003): 433-457.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Thames. *Persuasion's Domain: An Introduction to Rhetoric and Human Affairs*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt, 1999. p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> Eric S. Knowles and Jay A. Linn. *Resistance and Persuasion*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004.

<sup>20</sup> M. D. Slater. "Entertainment Education and the persuasive Impact of Narratives." *Narrative Impact: Social and Cognitive Foundations*. Eds., M. C. Green, J. J. Strange, and T. C. Brock. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum. Pp. 157-181. Cited in Eric S. Knowles and Jay A. Linn. *Resistance and Persuasion*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004.

<sup>21</sup> Gillian Bennett. "Narrative as Expository Discourse." *Journal of American Folklore*, 99 (1986): 415-434.

<sup>22</sup> James Truslow Adams. *The Epic of America*. New York: Simon Publications, 1931/2001, pp. 214-215.

<sup>23</sup> Jennifer L. Hochschild. *Facing Up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation*. Princeton UP, 1996.

<sup>24</sup> "Obama Talks with Joe the Plumber." ABC News, 10/15/08. <http://abcnews.go.com/Video/playerIndex?id=6031110>.