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## IDEOLOGY AND AMERICAN HISTORY

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### INTRODUCTION

In contemporary discussions, the word *ideological* often carries a negative connotation. In political arguments, we often hear people accused of being ideological, which means that they are guided by a rigid set of assumptions in which they have blind faith rather than by a careful assessment of reality. For instance, a Marxist ideologue is someone who believes that a capitalist economy inevitably results in class conflict that will eventually lead to the system's downfall. Or, on the opposite end of the political spectrum, there is the free-market ideologue, who believes that free markets are *always* the best way to distribute goods and services.

### DEFINITION

Historians, however, often use the word *ideology* in a slightly different way. An ideology is a way of thinking—a set of interrelated ideas, assumptions, and values—that explains and defends particular interests and social structures. An ideology is not simply a political position on a particular issue. It can be a *worldview* that a person uses to articulate a vision of how the world should be. In this sense, ideologies go well beyond describing reality: they prescribe. Although ideologies consist of things that might seem abstract (ideas, assumptions, and values), they shape the concrete ways that people live in the world.

### AN EXAMPLE

Generally speaking, an ideology is constructed and circulated by people who have power in a particular society. This class uses ideology as a tool to justify and maintain its power and influence. Ideologies often make it seem as if the existing social order is natural, inevitable, or superior. Take, for example, the ideology of “manifest destiny,” the 19<sup>th</sup>-century notion that the U.S. should expand across the American continent. The phrase itself, “manifest destiny,” gave the expansion of the U.S. an air of inevitability: expansion was the American destiny, approved by God, and it was manifest (clearly apparent) that this was the case. By referring to God's plan for America, the ideology of manifest destiny thus justified white Americans in their conquest of western lands held by Native and Hispanic Americans. The ideology made western conquest seem right and inevitable. Although some ideologies (*e.g.*, proslavery) are viewed negatively from the perspective of the present, there are others (*e.g.*, republicanism and liberalism) that are often viewed positively.

### SOME AMERICAN IDEOLOGIES UP TO 1865

republicanism	democracy	middle-class moralism	separate spheres
liberalism	paternalism	free labor	manifest destiny
agrarianism	proslavery	domesticity	nativism



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