

Does ideology cause conflict or is it just an exacerbating factor ?
essay sample



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This essay will examine ideologies and conflicts in attempt to determine whether ideology is the sole cause of all conflict, whether it is only a contributor, if it has no affect on conflict, or controversially in today's society if it is now being use to discise other reasons for conflict.

In order to determine whether ideology is the cause of international conflict or just an exacerbating factor then we must first be able to define what an ideology is, and also what constitutes as a conflict.

The oxford dictionary describes ideology as “ any comprehensive and mutually consistent set of ideas by which a social group makes sense of the world¹”. It uses examples such as liberalism, communism and nationalism. The term was first used French philosopher Antoine Destutt de Tracy. The 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 socio-political 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.

Conflict, nevertheless can be described as a state of opposition, or also the clashing of opposed principles². When people think conflict they automatically think of conflict between two countries, wars. However conflict can also be between two groups. Such examples as the Protestants and Catholics within Northern Ireland. Another view is that the conflict which is held between the working class and upper class. Marx believes this class-war to be the greatest form of conflict and once it disappears all other forms of conflict would fade away. This example of conflict is a key example of ideology causing conflict as it is a battle between capitalism and communism. Thus it can be said that Marx thought that ideology is the cause of conflict as every battle came down to capitalism versus communism or the proletariat fighting against the bourgeoisie. Yet this is a controversial view point as within countries that adopted communism many conflicts still occurred.

When conflict and ideology are thought of the cold war seems the most obvious place to start; Gladis believes that the origins of the cold war lie in the fact that the USA were anti-communist and that the USSR were led by Stalin with his dictatorship views. He believes the cold war to be a Battle of the ideologies. Therefore, his views can be used to argue that the cold war can be said to be. However other historians differ in opinion they believe other factors contributed to the occurrence of the cold war. Revisionists believe that US are at fault due to open door policies. Yet many others believe that it was simply due to a struggle of power between two super-states USSR and US.

Another example of a conflict which can be argued to be due to ideological difference between capitalism and communism is Vietnam, whereby the American fear of their ideology led to a huge war resulting in a mass number of deaths. The situation within Cuba is another key example of an ideological conflict. Cuba, while it has never suffered from an actual war with other countries due to its communist regime it has yet been in a state of conflict with the USA, this has been upheld through economic constraints, such as the embargo placed on Cuba.

Another form of ideology that within the area of conflict is significant is nationalism; this ideology is at the basis of many conflicts that take place between two countries, as its belief is the superiority of a nation over every other nation. "The major superpower confrontations, which have dominated the world for forty years ... claim that nationalism as its rationale and goal". Examples of this can be shown through violent conflicts between ethnic groups within the eastern European countries, recently the war between the Serbs and the Croats in the former Yugoslavia. Yet some believe nationalism not to be an ideology. While most text books on ideology include a chapter on nationalism. Hobsbawm argues "no satisfactory criterion can be discovered for deciding which of the many human collectives should be labelled as a nation". In which he means that many victorious nationalists do not believe all nationalist desires to be equal which they should had their beliefs been ideological. Hobsbawm claims that nationalism therefore is not an ideology.

Religion is an important ideology when looking at the causes of conflict;

many recent conflicts have been due to beliefs in different religions. Prime
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examples of this are between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland and the Israelis and Palestinians. However these conflicts are also due to battle for land between these groups.

Democracy is a modern ideology; which can be seen as a cause to many conflicts. Recent wars between the USA and Afganistan or Iraq can be said to be due to the at that these countries maintain a undemocratic often dictatorship form of rule in which the USA disagree with and believe is unfair to the populations of these countries However, while the US may like us to believe that the reason or these conflicts are ue to ideological differences, such as them not accepting democracy, and ruling their countries through a totalitarian dictatorship. However the true reason is often due to the wish economical dominance over other countries, such as the recent war with Iraq, many including names such as Tony Benn believe that the key reason that the USA declared war on Iraq was due to the oil within the country. Within this view ideologies are used as a discise, the true reason for conflict thus being economical.

It is therefore possible to conclude that ideological differences have resulted in a number of conflicts however it is very difficult to judge as it is hard to define what clarifies as an ideology or what does not. Yet, the essay concludes that factors such as money, power, and land are also highly influential when it comes to the causes of conflict, especially in today's society.

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1 Oxford dictionary - Ideology

2 oxford dictionary - conflict

3 using political ideas - chap 11 - 249, Barbra Goodwin