Ideology and the Transition to Democracy

The American Heritage dictionary defines ideology as: "1) The body of ideas reflecting the social needs and aspirations of an individual, group, class or culture; and 2) A set of doctrines or beliefs that form the basis of a political, economic, or other system." As a student of sociology, I have become more and more aware of the way in which ideology shapes how we understand the world around us. Ideology influences us as individuals – our values, our norms, and our goals; while ideology is also at work on a larger scale – our government, our policies, and our institutions. Especially after reading Michael Mann's Incoherent Empire, when I look at the state of the U.S. government today, and its involvement in the "War on Terror" as well as the War in Iraq, its use of ideology is extremely visible. One sign of ideology's involvement in the Unites States' current foreign policy is the loaded language that is used to mobilize support for the war, such as "terrorism," "axis of evil," and "rogue states". This language makes it appear as if these wars are being fought over ideas more than anything else, especially given the now widely accepted fact that the supposed motivation for the War in Iraq, the threat that Iraq was harboring "weapons of mass destruction," have not been found there. The absence of a universal definition of terrorism, and that it is largely debatable (and highly subjective) who constitutes a "terrorist" and who doesn't, adds to strength to the argument for the ideological basis of these wars.

When I think about the Bush administration's depiction of these wars as the struggle of "good" (the United States, and other Western, democratic allies) vs. "evil" (Islamic terrorist organizations, the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein, and other Arab nations harboring terrorists), and the ultimate goal of the U.S. in Iraq – the transition to

"freedom" and democracy, I can't help but wonder if this is even possible, how beneficial a democracy will actually be for the Iraqi people, and if freedom and democracy are always synonymous (as the U.S. ideology implies). This made me realize what I consider to be one problem that social change faces today: that the United States advocates the spread of democracy as if it can be universally applied and experienced as *the* solution for all nations, when, in reality, nations coming from distinct socio-cultural and historical backgrounds experience democracy differently (and not always in a positive way). The failure of the United States' discourse on democracy to recognize the negatives of a transition to democracy – the violence often needed to bring about the change; social inequality, and those who are marginalized or under-represented (i.e. - women and other minorities); the cultural politics of transition, the cultural hegemony of the West; the difficulties associated with economic integration into a capitalist, free market economy; and the maintenance of power in the hands of the few (elites) at the expense of the many (poor); are all examples of ways in which democracy could be improved.

Because the United States government is so busy promoting and spreading democracy, it leaves little room for criticism. I am interested in a critical look at specific cases of transition to democracy, concentrating on the problems associated with these transitions, with the intention of improving the contemporary practice of democracy as it is applied in different situations. My analysis would emphasize the particulars of each situation, rather than one theory that can be universally applied, which will give insight to the need for a more dynamic discourse on the spread of democracy, looking more at the realities of its practice rather than its oftentimes unrealistic goals. By allowing the U.S. to recognize the shortcomings of the installment of a democratic system and concentrate on

its improvement, allowing for flexibility and cooperation with other nations, we could regain the respect that we have lost in our current foreign affairs choices, and restore the confidence of nations in need of help to look to us as a legitimate aid. Although I look at this problem as a way of improving U.S. foreign policy, what I am studying is important for the nature of social change on a much larger scale. It asks us to look at the way that social change occurs, ideology's role in the process, and how we can use our understanding of the ideologies that drive us in order to understand each other better, in an attempt to minimize violence.

I would begin my analysis by looking at recent examples of the experience of the transition to democracy in different contexts – specifically in the Eastern European post-Soviet countries (Poland, the former Yugoslavia, Hungary, Estonia, Ukraine) studied by Michael Kennedy in his book The Cultural Formations of Post-Communism, and in the Central American countries (Costa Rica, Nicaragua, El Salvador) studied by Jeffery Paige in his book Coffee and Power: Revolution and the Rise of Democracy in Central America. These divergent experiences share: a common a past of authoritarianism; a recent transition to democracy; an incidence of violence in transition; and in many cases worked in cooperation with the United States in the transition to a capitalist economy, heavily influenced by its free market, democratic based ideological vision. However, the regions in which this took place, as well as the past leading up to the transition, are distinct enough to provide a wide-ranging look at a shared experience, pointing to a variety of ways in which each country is still negotiating its way through the challenges they continue to face, and the implications that this has for their future participation in democracy and global capitalism. These perspectives both focus on the way that ideology

drives action, as they seek to fully understand the ideas leading up to, and immediately following a rupture with the past in the transition to democracy.

In his book, Paige looks at the close relation between coffee, power, and ideology in his articulation of revolution and the rise of democracy in Central America: "Coffee and power have been closely linked in Central America since the nineteenth century. Coffee created the dynastic elites and shaped the political institutions that faced revolutionary crisis in the 1980s," (Paige, 3). Through his unique focus on the ideology of the coffee elite and the power it had in the rise of democracy, Paige shows that the Central America does not conform to Barrington Moore's standard model Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy. By pointing to this difference, Paige is emphasizing a critical look at each country's experience, rather than trying to conform each history into one model, "a revised history is necessary not only to account for the historical differences among Central American political systems, but also to explain the current convergence of all three, whatever their past agrarian structures, on some version of representative democracy," (Paige, 7). His book uses a critical approach in an attempt to explain the civil wars of the 1980s, and their origins in the turn of the century:

> It is a study of both ideological and political transformation. It is of course impossible to separate the ideology and actions of the elite from the greater political and social systems of which they are a part, but these systems were in part a creation of the coffee elite. The revolutionary crises of the 1980s were crises of the coffee elites and the societies they made at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. Understanding their views and the historical origins of the 1980s conflicts, it is hoped, will provide insight not only into the common outcome – neo-liberalism and democracy, but also into the profound differences among the political systems of these three countries as the 1980s began. (Paige, 5).

Through interviews with members of the coffee elite, Paige comes to an understanding of the rise of democracy in Central America and shows that of the three countries he looks at, the coffee elite of each shares the dominant ideological importance of liberal values like "progress," "liberty," and "democracy," which they use to justify violent revolution as a means of achieving these ideals. In these interviews, Paige not only looks at their explicit values, but also at the implicit meanings of those ideas and events that are intentionally absent their narrative, thereby giving voice to a counter-narrative.

Similarly, Kennedy looks at both the narrative and counter-narrative of transition culture in post-communism. In his analysis of the transition from communism to democracy in Eastern Europe, he seeks to understand transition culture as a phenomenon, and the cultural politics that are an essential component of this understanding. He defines cultural politics as: "the attempt to influence and transform meanings, values, and representations accompanying the exercise of power and influence," (lecture, 9/29). The aim of this book is to study the nature of a specific instance of social change by looking at the transition from socialism (capitalism's counterculture) to capitalism. Although the book is not immediately concerned with the transition from communism to democracy, it does look at its social, cultural, and economic consequences, especially emphasizing its contradictions. For example, in the beginning of chapter two "Transition Culture and Transition Poverty" Kennedy describes civil society as the key component of the mobilization of society against communism, and discusses its essential contradictory character: "Its various normative principles – private property, political and organizational pluralism, national self-determination, human rights, popular expression, procedural rationality, tolerance, and the rule of law, to name a few – are very easily

drawn into conflict with one another," (Kennedy, 92). He shows that this contradictory character gave civil society strength in theory, as it motivated its emancipatory impulse, but was debilitating in practice: "recognizing that contentiousness is important for enhancing civil society's emancipatory potential, but it has not been useful for consolidating post-communist institutional change," (ibid.). By looking at the difficulties of civil society, we can understand that from the very beginning, the transition has faced challenges in the translation of theory to practice. It was precisely civil society's strong normative basis (which closely resembles that of the U.S.'s version of freedom through democracy), that made its implementation so difficult to achieve, "this 'protoliberal' civil society would not, however, retain its influence when institutional transformation of the economy became the principle focus of state power and these opposition figures turned into state leaders," (ibid.). This example of civil society mirrors the ideological impulse of the U.S. its push to install democracy throughout the world. In the beginning of the process, there is a strong emphasis on the ideals of freedom, liberty, and justice for all; but in the implementation of these practices, especially in regards to the wars that are started to bring about these changes, we often fall short of making the dream a reality.

The way that Kennedy describes civil society is not unlike the framework that Jeffrey Paige uses in his analysis of the rise of democracy in Central America, in the sense that the ideals that initiated transition (in the form of popular revolution) are difficult to implement in practice: "In the short run, and possibly in the long run as well, neo-liberal policies have only increased the size and misery of the semi-proletariat and informal sector that were a key element in the revolts in the first place. Containing disorder from this sector is an increasing problem not only in Central America but

elsewhere in the hemisphere," (Paige, 335). In contrast to the transition to democracy in Eastern Europe, where those who initiated the change (civil society) were still present after the fall of communism (the new state leaders), in Central America those who initiated the change (semi-proletariat and informal sector) were excluded once the transition to democracy was complete: "In Nicaragua and El Salvador important fractions of the elite remain unreconciled to the incorporation of the left into the electoral political system," (Paige, 334).

Paige and Kennedy's analyses are similar in that they use a critical analysis of the politics of change, taking into account the way that popular ideology has shaped social change in each case, which leads to the potential for destruction that ideology can enable. Kennedy's criticism is most apparent chapter six "transition culture and nationalism's wars," where he examines how the construction of nationalism has produced extreme ideological conflict and ethnic violence in the former Yugoslavia, thereby emphasizing the dark side (and costs) of transition culture: "Communism's peaceful collapse reinforced a Western sense of late modernity's interconnectedness and peaceful trajectory, but communism's violent sequel offended that very disposition and the presumptions enabling that opinion," (Kennedy, 232). In contrast to Kennedy, who looks at violence as a result of the ideology that promoted transition, Paige looks at war as a first step in the process of transition: He begins on page 1: "The wars of the 1980s in Central America had left close to 200,000 people dead and created 2,000,000 refugees. They had been wars of extraordinary brutality and viciousness, particularly to civilians," and concludes on page 337, "The road to democracy through socialist revolution from below has profoundly changed the political and economic institutions of Central

America. It has also brought about a substantial change in the realm of ideas." The importance of each author's inclusion of the destructiveness of war points to the potentially volatile character of social change, even when it is based on an ideology that is supposed to promote liberation, freedom, and democracy. This is important to keep in mind as we consider the motivation behind the U.S.'s current involvement in Iraq, and the mounting military and civilian causalities on both sides of the conflict.

In order to better understand the use of ideology in the transition to democracy, it is valuable to study those countries where this transition could be possible in the current context, for example, countries like Cuba and Iraq. By looking at the competing ideologies that could enable a transition from dictatorship to democracy, before, after and during transition, while drawing on what we know from the past experiences in Eastern Europe and Central America, there is the possibility that we could enable a more peaceful transition. In my own study, I would focus specifically on those areas where the potential for violence is the greatest – those factions of society that are outside of the dominant ideology driving the change, where violence can be used both by these marginalized groups to get their voices heard, as well as by the dominant ideology in an attempt to silence those voices who do not conform to their project. The connections between ideology, violence, and the transition to democracy are important to study, not only in an attempt to reconcile its essentially contradictory character, but also in order to help direct peaceful social change amidst uncertainty and chaos.