

AMERICA'S QUEST

FOR SUPREMACY AND THE THIRD WORLD

AN ESSAY IN GRAMSCIAN ANALYSIS

ENRICO AUGELLI AND CRAIG MURPHY

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America's Quest for Supremacy and the Third World

A Gramscian Analysis

Enrico Augelli and Craig Murphy



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Contents

Acknowledgements	vii
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Introduction	1
Notes	9

PART I: IDEOLOGY

1 Gramsci's understanding of ideology	13
Gramsci's critique	13
Ideology as worldview and political force	16
Liberalism as ideology	25
Toward applying Gramsci's concepts	29
Notes	30
2 Elements of common sense in America	35
Denominational religion: American destiny, isolationism, evangelism, and crusaderism	37
Liberalism: competitive individualism, property, and the market	44
Faith in science	48
Elements of contradictory consciousness in America	51
Notes	52
3 Ideology and American foreign policy	58
American destiny and the legitimization of American foreign policy	58
The United States as a minor power	60
The United States as a great power	66
The troubled superpower	70
Notes	72
4 The case of foreign assistance	75
Philosophical perspectives on American aid policy	75
The changing mix of motivations for American aid	80
Conflicting ideologies as constraints on American aid policy	92
Notes	94

5	Reagan and American common sense	97
	Understanding Reagan's ascendancy	98
	Reagan as an intellectual	99
	Reagan and old-fashioned liberalism	102
	Reagan and the religious	103
	Reagan's faith in science	105
	Was there an alternative?	106
	Ideology: summary and conclusion	111
	Notes	113

PART II: SUPREMACY

6	Gramsci's understanding of supremacy	117
	Gramsci on hegemony	117
	Gramsci on supremacy	126
	Toward applying Gramsci's concepts	134
	Notes	134
7	The Third World and the challenge to American supremacy	138
	America's historical bloc	139
	The significance of the economic growth of Europe and Japan	141
	The Third World and the new US demands on its allies	142
	America's inability to shield allies from the oil shocks	145
	America's failure to respond to the New International Economic Order	145
	The failure to quiet the Third World with economic development or force	147
	The failure of the alternative bloc's leadership	149
	Notes	151
8	Force and consensus in the world economy	154
	Reagan's domestic economic policy mix	156
	Force in the world economy	160
	Hegemony and domination in the world economy	171
	Notes	175
9	Force and consensus in international civil society	179
	The rhetorical value of the military	180
	Force in international civil society	182
	International civil society and attempts to extend hegemony to the Third World	189
	Supremacy: summary and conclusion	197
	Beyond American common sense	199
	Notes	200
	Index	203

Introduction

This has not been a good century for those with imperial ambitions. The defeat of Hitler's 'thousand-year' *Reich* also meant the defeat of the much older empires of modern Europe; decolonization of British, French, Dutch, and Belgian dependencies followed from the second world war. By 1975 the mutually reinforcing revolutions in the Portuguese metropole and the colonies brought the last and oldest of the modern European empires to an end as well.

Even more striking in 1975 was the fate of the global ambitions of one great victor of the world wars; America's post-war empire appeared ready to disappear with the rest. The US had lost its paramount role in the world economy that it had helped shape. American firms in the sectors that had led the unprecedented global industrial expansion after the war were losing their competitive edge; even many Americans preferred Japanese or German cars to ones built at home. American initiative in the new industries of the next industrial wave—consumer electronics and even microprocessors—appeared to be no match for that of its major allies. The American dollar was no longer good as gold; monetary maneuvers on the part of a US government desperate to make its industrial partners bear some of the costs of managing the world economy assured that. Even the comfortable assumption that American gains in productivity would always outstrip those of other industrial nations had been replaced with the uneasy realization that other industrial economies would soon outpace the United States.

The signs of the downfall of the American global system appeared clearest in its relations to its weakest partners, the less-industrialized nations of the Third World, many of them recently independent, and most of them with relatively weak governments that could not exact significant resources from their own populations. Even so, these governments had been able to make successful demands on the world economy that the United States had helped establish and still protected. Oil producing nations had doubled and redoubled the price of the leading commodity in world trade. In 1974, standing behind the oil producers, the Third World defiantly demanded a change in the world economy's rules, a 'New International Economic Order,' that would further divide the power to govern international economic affairs, strengthening the non-oil producing Third World nations enough to make their alliance as much of a potential challenger to US supremacy as America's industrial partners and the oil-rich nations had become.

It was not only on economic grounds that the American empire was

challenged. The US military suffered its first modern defeat, and that by a Third World army. Later, as the 1970s wore on, the United States suffered other 'defeats' in the Third World. It failed to prevent the rise of revolutionary regimes in Ethiopia, Lusophone Africa, and Afghanistan and suffered the humiliation of lacking the equipment or foresight to mount a successful attempt to rescue the American hostages held in Iran throughout the 1980 presidential campaign year.

By then the confidence of the American public in the traditional symbols of American power had been shaken for a decade. In the early 1970s, within the space of four years, Americans had to accept a half-a-dozen events they long-assumed to be impossible: the dollar became just another promise. The US lost a war. A vice-president and president were forced to resign. And even before those agonies were completed Americans suffered what was even a greater shock for the generation that had grown up in the prosperous and mobile era after the war: the oil crisis.

In the cold winter of 1973–74 the American habit of frequent, low-cost travel over the vast distances of the continent had to end. An entire *Gestalt* of freedom, ease, mobility, and plenty was broken. The cover of the radical magazine *Ramparts*, one of the voices that had helped unify the national leftist political movements of the 1960s, told the story: 'The Last Christmas in America.'

Ramparts looked forward to the new realism that hard times would foster, but the Christmas after the first oil crisis was also the magazine's last; there was no longer a market for its progressive vision in the bleaker nation it had foretold. Before the decade was out the US entered the deepest and most persistent economic downturn since the Great Depression of the 1930s. New graduates faced levels of unemployment that their teachers had confidently told them were unimaginable in the Keynesian world of the American post-war economy.

It was not only the American public that perceived a great change in the 1970s; the best scholarly analysis pointed to the same thing. The American community of international relations scholars alternatively lamented the end of American dominance, forecasting global calamity as a result,¹ or looked for the peaceful and productive opportunities associated with the United States becoming an 'ordinary country,' more like other industrialized nations.² Overseas, Fernand Braudel, perhaps the greatest authority on the modern world-economy, went even further to speculate that the global social changes of the early 1970s reflected a major global turning point, not just a major cyclical downturn in the business cycle, like the Great Depression of the 1930s, or even the beginning of the end of America's supremacy, but the beginning of the end of a cycle of European dominance of the world which began four centuries ago.

Yet, by the time Braudel's words were published in the United States, in the 1984 translation of volume three of *Civilization and Capitalism*, they already appeared *passé*. As Ronald Reagan's partisans were fond of proclaiming,

'America' was 'back.' Although some Third World economies suffered through the worst depression in their modern history, and most industrial nations experienced a decade of slow growth, the Reagan years appeared to many in the United States as ones of unprecedented prosperity. The job outlook for university graduates brightened. (Although overall unemployment generally remained higher than it had been throughout the 1970s.) Inflation moderated. Many Americans had money to spend on the new consumer products: video games, home computers, sportier cars. Americans felt confident again.

The key to that confidence, the one real change that had taken place in the Reagan years, was the reassertion of the United States's international role. After his re-election in 1984 (a year that turned out to be not quite as bad as many Americans, weaned on Orwell's vision, had spent much of their lives expecting) Reagan presided over a nation that was, once again, the world's acknowledged leader. It is true, Reagan had made no dramatic proposals to organize world opinion or transform world politics and it is doubtful that he would have had the power to do so. It is true that in Lebanon the American armed forces, enriched by Reagan's unprecedented peacetime rearmament budget, demonstrated no more competence than they had in Jimmy Carter's botched attempt to rescue the Iran hostages. And it is true that economists now worry about problems that became acute under Reagan: the growing Third World debt, the growing official US debt, and America's continuing lack of competitiveness implied by its growing trade deficit. Nevertheless, the US had won a war (albeit a small one) in Grenada, proving that the aging superpower was not yet a completely toothless tiger. And Reagan demonstrated American willingness to use force anywhere that American interests were compromised or 'American values' threatened.

We find two aspects of this new American attitude and role in the world fascinating and difficult to explain. First is the fact that the American people, who scholars often present as remarkably sophisticated politically,³ appear to have been mobilized by an undistinguished, aging actor who tells corny jokes and rambling stories and who rarely worries about logical consistency. Second, and perhaps even more puzzling, is the fact that both America's allies and adversaries, who had objected to American leadership under Carter, despite his more caring attitude toward the world outside the US, accepted a substantial reconstruction and concentration of international power in Reagan's hands.

Both Reagan's reputation as the 'Great Communicator' and the apparent lack of any substantive change in the economic base of American power as well as the country's basically *unchanged* military competence suggest that explanations of both the Reagan phenomenon and the reconstruction of American supremacy will have to emphasize ideology and changes in political-economic strategy as much as the dynamics of traditional power politics. That is why we turned to Antonio Gramsci, one of the most perceptive modern students of

ideology and political power, to help us explain these puzzling developments and analyze their effect on the Third World.

For those who have not yet had the chance to meet Gramsci on their intellectual journeys it may be useful to recall that this once obscure Sardinian Marxist was a man of thought and action who became the leader of the Italian Communist Party in the 1920s and died in 1937 after ten years in fascist prisons. There he wrote one of the most thoughtful modern studies of politics and society, his *Prison Notebooks*, the basis for our analysis.

In the half-century since his death scholars and politicians have studied Gramsci's writings, arguing about what he really meant, assessing the value of his ideas, and applying them to practical problems. From Italy, where his theories have become a source of inspiration for scholars across the political spectrum as well as the orthodoxy of the Italian Communist Party, analysis of Gramsci's work spread to France, and, from there, more recently, to the English-speaking world. The resulting body of research—large, although often contradictory and uneven—assures the position of Gramsci's work among the Marxist classics. Commentators on Gramsci generally agree that he made an important contribution to the renewal of Marxist theory by fighting against the economic determinism prevalent at the beginning of the century.⁴ Gramsci felt that such 'economism' not only simplified a much more complex reality, but also reflected a fatalist attitude towards history and social change. He realized, as experience has shown, that capitalism would not fall nor would socialism arise in the absence of political action by an organized working class. To overcome this shortcoming of conventional Marxist interpretations, Gramsci re-evaluated the importance of society's 'superstructures' (law, religion, culture, etc.) and he attributed a new importance to politics and to political activity.

His work remains important to Marxists today. It has been used to critique the fatalism inherent in Louis Althusser's attempt to create a purely 'scientific' Marxism. (In Althusser's structural model people are forced to act out a script written by social forces over which they have little control.) Gramsci's theory recognizes the role of human will without accepting the radically voluntarist assumptions of Sartre's existentialism or those versions of the Frankfurt School's critical theory that attribute the human capacity to change the world to consciousness alone.⁵

More significantly, to us, Gramsci's ideas help bridge the gap between Marxist and liberal social science. They allow scholars from both camps to begin to understand each other by providing a common ground for communicating about their different interpretations of history and society. Gramsci ignores the strict opposition between 'Marxist' and 'bourgeois' thought that so many scholars accept, a view that makes it impossible for either camp to enrich the other. The attempt to maintain the strict opposition between camps leads both Marxist and bourgeois scholars to emphasize some of the least-realistic assumptions of their own theories. Marxist scholars fall back on

economic determinism and explain every social change as the result of class struggle even when facts have to be stretched to fit the theory. Liberal scholars see self-interest underlying even the most altruistic action or else, when they have decided to reject such single-factor explanations, they fail to differentiate between fundamental forces and marginal, episodic factors.

Our research builds on the common ground for Marxist and liberal social science that Gramsci provides. This is not a book on Gramsci's thought, but a book which uses Gramsci's ideas to help understand contemporary international relations. Gramsci gives us a method of analysis which we apply to a problem which interests us, even though it may not have interested him.

This is a perfectly reasonable thing to do because even though Gramsci's theory as a whole must be considered part of what he calls the 'philosophy of praxis,' the Marxist philosophy aimed at a particular type of social transformation, his worldview can be distinguished from his analytical method and its new conceptual instruments, and either can be separated from the revolutionary strategy he recommended. We use Gramsci's analytical methods and conceptual tools, isolating them from his view of the world and leaving aside his political program. Gramsci would not have objected to this approach. He himself derived hypotheses about society from the broader philosophical analyses of perceptive thinkers whose worldviews he did not always accept, considering it, 'a process of abstraction which is inherent in the scientific method itself.'⁶ Although some orthodox Marxists may see this approach as a distortion of Gramsci's thought, we would hope that instead they might consider our attempt to abstract social science theory from Gramsci's more complex philosophy of praxis as an aid in understanding his overall message. Certainly most Marxists would agree that Gramsci really did further political analysis by devising new conceptual tools. Demonstrating the usefulness of those tools is, to our minds, one way to illustrate the importance of his thought. But this means making Gramsci's work more than a mere inspiration for revolutionary strategies; it means placing Gramsci among the great social theorists, both Marxist and bourgeois, who have made significant and lasting contributions to our understanding of social reality.

Nevertheless, we accept, as Gramsci did, that totally detached, impartial social scientific analysis is not possible. As Gramsci says, in politics and sociology there are no neutral ideas, no views unaffected by the past experience, value-systems, class position, and social status of the analyst.⁷ We wrote this book because we share a point of view influenced by our study and work in the development field. We believe that the aspirations and expectations of the Third World as expressed in the 1970s program for a New International Economic Order are legitimate. Moreover, we consider what might be called the 'north-south Keynesian compromise' suggested in the two major reports of the Brandt Commission⁸ to be a sensible basis for ethical north-south relations and we regret that this view is not shared by more of the international

community. In fact, we are convinced that only on the basis of the implementation of such a program will it be possible to build a more just international community concerned with meeting human needs and expanding human aspirations. We hope that this book will have a role in encouraging the ends we seek. By helping to expose the means through which the current system of international domination has been reinforced and the greater part of the Third World marginalized, we may be able to contribute to change by helping, as Gramsci said, 'educate politically . . . those who are not in the know.'⁹

Even though we have limited ourselves to applying Gramsci's work as a method of social science analysis we still must choose among various interpretations of his work. Gramsci did not have the time to prepare his *Notebooks* for publication nor would the psychological and physical conditions in prison have allowed it. This is the first and most obvious reason why scholars disagree about what he really meant. The second stems from Gramsci's life as a political activist and writer before his imprisonment. Some see his *Notebooks* as simply a more mature development of what he believed and said previously. Others see a major 'epistemological' break between what he said as a free man and what he wrote in prison. Non-Italian-speaking readers confront a third difficulty, the lack of complete translations. The Istituto Gramsci's unabridged critical edition of the *Notebooks*, published in 1975, has yet to appear in English.¹⁰ The much-shorter English *Selections from Prison Notebooks*,¹¹ inevitably leaves out important parts of the text and reorders the material in a way that necessarily reflects the editors' own concerns. Moreover, as every translator knows, translation itself always involves interpretation.

Although we were able consult the original source in the unabridged Italian edition, we were still confronted with all the other problems of interpretation and want to state our positions at the outset. For us, Gramsci's *Notebooks* do not represent a major break with his previous work. His primary goals remain constant: to dismantle capitalism and construct socialist society. Yet, his understanding of contemporary society changed as a result of his prison studies.

In prison Gramsci concentrated on three questions:

Why, contrary to Marxist theory, had a revolution taken place in underdeveloped Russia rather than in the industrialized West?

Why had fascism taken hold in Italy despite the existence of a strong and organized working class?

And, finally, why was the news about Soviet socialism under Stalin so contradictory?

In answering the first question Gramsci came to reject simplistic economic determinism. In answering the second, he abandoned the voluntarism of his youth, his belief that organized workers could do anything that they set their minds to. In answering the third, Gramsci deduced that a successful revolution did not necessarily imply the construction of a socialist and democratic society. All three questions led him to carry out a general analysis of society and develop

a nuanced theory of political change. It is this analysis and theory that guides our study.

In view of our interest in applying Gramsci's insights it is irrelevant for us to enter into the debate about the 'epistemological break' or to attempt to found our interpretation on Gramsci's pre-prison writings. We believe that the *Notebooks*, though often difficult to interpret, make up a coherent whole, a work that rewards patient reading with careful attention to semantics.¹² This position also reflects the way we approach the first problem mentioned: We believe that although Gramsci was not able to provide a final, formal, order for his thoughts, his *Notebooks* are internally consistent.

Given the many problems of interpretation, we do not use Gramsci's theory of society in its entirety. To do so would require in-depth study of the dynamics of what Gramsci calls the 'historical bloc,' the dialectical unity between economic structure and superstructure, and we would have to explore all of Gramsci's various improvements upon Engels's overall model of social change, the transition from one historical social epoch to the next. This would be difficult to do now; although some interesting studies of the Gramscian historical bloc exist,¹³ the body of research using this, Gramsci's 'ultimate' social concept, is too small to allow its straightforward application to international relations. Nonetheless, we recognize that a more global approach has met with some success in Robert W. Cox's application of a structuralist model inspired by Gramsci to the study of successive world orders.¹⁴ Cox takes into account three interrelated forces—material abilities, ideas, and institutions—and identifies the dynamics of social change with the shaping of social forces by relations of production.

Our aim is at the same time more modest and more ambitious than Cox's. More modest, in that we only want to understand a limited set of problems: the Reagan phenomenon in the context of the history of American foreign policy and the way in which a new concentration of international power occurred in the United States in the 1980s.¹⁵ More ambitious, because we believe that simply a more detailed elaboration of a few Gramscian concepts will prove more valuable for explaining international relations than the ones scholars currently have at their disposal.

Among the many concepts that Gramsci advanced—'passive revolution,' 'war of movement' versus 'war of position,' 'traditional' and 'organic intellectuals,' 'popular-national' sentiments, 'Cesarism,' 'intellectual and moral reform,' etc.—we have chosen his understanding of 'ideology' and 'supremacy' as the core of our analysis of the change in the American relationship with the Third World over the last decade. The book consists of two parts, corresponding to these two concepts. Both parts begin with an outline of one of Gramsci's concepts followed by applications.

The first part leads up to an explanation of the Reagan phenomenon. We demonstrate that Reagan reflects what Gramsci calls 'common sense' (ideology

without critical reflection) and show the support for his program that can be found in what really is common sense to most Americans. To do that we first deconstruct American ideology using Gramsci's method. Then we apply the reconstructed model to analyses of the general orientations of American foreign policy and foreign assistance policy in order to verify the significance of the ideological themes we have isolated and provide the necessary historical background for understanding the changes in the 1980s. Finally, we use this substantiated model of American ideology to discuss Reagan's rise to power.

A Gramscian explanation of Reagan's success proves more powerful than the more traditional explanations offered by either 'pluralist' or 'elite' theory. According to pluralist theory, American presidents gain popular support for a political program in a national competition of ideas. In the more elaborate version, the democratic process in the United States takes place through competition among different interest groups until a coalition prevails and imposes its political orientation on the country. According to elite theory a kind of permanent conspiracy exists: American businessmen look for an instrument, a person they can trust, to control the government and dominate the country. In general, Gramscian analysis rejects both the assumption of widespread competition in parliamentary states and that of conspiracy as unrealistic. Moreover, Gramsci's emphasis on the role of cultural factors in politics makes it possible for us to derive a single explanation of the Reagan phenomenon, the long-term orientation of American foreign policy, and the unique American approach to relations with the less-industrialized world, three factors which combine in the reconstruction of American supremacy in the 1980s.

The second part of the book analyzes how the United States succeeded in reconcentrating international power in the 1980s and looks at the consequences of that development for the Third World. At the center of our analysis is Gramsci's concept of 'supremacy,' a broader concept than his more widely-known notion of 'hegemony.' We transpose the use Gramsci makes of Machiavelli's distinction between concentrating power either by force or through consensus at different levels of society (the economy, civil society, and political society) to international society. This presents no insurmountable difficulties due to the unusually central role the United States government has played in the capitalist world-economy since the second world war. Gramsci's concepts are particularly appropriate for interpreting American foreign policy during the years when this role was challenged and then reestablished. Reagan's global 'counterrevolution' can be described in the same terms Gramsci used to propose a strategy for a successful revolution. Of course, we are not suggesting that Reagan or his advisors consciously followed Gramsci's injunctions, but that they have been successful in so far as they have followed—at times by chance, at times because no alternative was available—the methods Gramsci proposed. We hope that our demonstration that Reagan's success has been a function of the degree to which he has been an unwitting 'Gramscian'

will serve as a convincing confirmation of the significance of Gramsci's thought even to anti-Marxist scholars.

Notes

1. An early theme of much of the neorealist scholarship and studies of international regimes that has filled the pages of prestigious American international relations journals for fifteen years. See Susan Strange's analysis of the ethnocentric motivation of this, nonetheless, useful literature, 'Cave, hic dragones: A Critique of Regime Analysis,' *International Organization*, 36 (1982): 479-96.
2. Richard Rosecrance, ed., *America as an Ordinary Country* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976).
3. E.g., Samuel P. Huntington, *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).
4. Introductions to Gramsci in English include: Joseph V. Femia, *Gramsci's Political Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977); John Hoffman, *The Gramscian Challenge* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984); James Joll, *Gramsci* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1977); Anne Showstack Sassoon, *Gramsci's Politics*, 2nd ed. (London: Hutchinson, 1987); and Roger Simon, *Gramsci's Political Thought: An Introduction* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1982), which has a useful short annotated bibliography.
5. See Robert Bocock, *Hegemony* (London: Tavistock, 1986).
6. Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere* (Torino: Einaudi, 1975), II, 1458.
7. See pp. 15-16, below.
8. Independent Commission on International Development Issues, *North-South: A Programme for Survival* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1980) and The Brandt Commission, *Common Crisis North-South: Cooperation for World Recovery* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983).
9. This is a comment on Machiavelli's doctrine. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, ed. and trans. (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), 135.
10. Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, Istituto Gramsci critical edition, Valentino Gerratana, ed. (Torino: Einaudi, 1975). This work is based on ten years of research with Gramsci's original manuscripts and consists of four volumes. Volume I: Quaderni (Notebooks) 1-5 (1929-32). Volume II: Quaderni 6-11 (1930-33). Volume III: Quaderni 12-29 (1932-35). Volume IV contains an extremely useful and extensive (nearly 1000-page) critical appendix, which includes, among other things, an index of works quoted in the *Notebooks*, several critical notes, a subject index, and a valuable concordance which allows the reader to trace Gramsci's original passages in the previous editions of the *Notebooks*, the first Einaudi edition, published between 1948 and 1951, and the Editori Riuniti reprint of 1971.
11. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, ed. and trans. (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971). This selection is based on the first Einaudi edition and is accompanied by an 80-page introduction on Gramsci's life and works in their historical context. The book has a short, 10-page, name and subject index.
12. A great deal of the existing confusion about what Gramsci really said is a function of a lack of widespread understanding of his terminology. It is worth emulating

Norberto Bobbio's path-breaking paper presented at the 'Convegno di studi gramsciani' held in Rome in 1958, in which he explained the three different meanings of 'dialettica' as used by Gramsci. See Norberto Bobbio, 'Nota sulla dialettica in Gramsci,' *Studi gramsciani* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1973), 73–86.

13. See in particular, Hughes Portelli, *Gramsci e il blocco storico* (Bari: Laterza, 1973).
14. Especially, 'Gramsci, Hegemony, and International Relations: An Essay in Method,' *Millennium*, 12 (1983): 162–75.
15. Our questions differ from Stephen Gill's in, 'US Hegemony: Its Limits and Prospects in the Reagan Era,' *Millennium* 15 (1986): 311–36. Gill treats the domestic sources of Reagan's rise as less problematic and his more structural interpretation, which resembles Cox's, leads him to treat the 1970s as a 'crisis of authority' for the US but not as a real challenge to US supremacy.

PART I
IDEOLOGY
