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Ideological hope

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ABSTRACT

The hope for a better future can, and frequently does, motivate political action. Political hope is therefore often considered a positive force. However, not all forms of political hope are beneficial. Some scholars and activists claim that some kinds of hope also function as an ideology. I argue that we can give a precise meaning to the notion of ‘ideological hope,’ and I argue that to say of a given instance of hope that it is ‘ideological’ means more than that it is irrational or immoral. I distinguish two forms of ideological hope: forms where the ideological nature of hope derives from underlying ideological beliefs and judgments, and structural forms. The case of structurally ideological hope shows that even the rational hopes of political agents can undermine their purposes by binding them to distorted political self-understandings.

KEYWORDS Hope; ideology; political agency

Introduction

Whether people participate in politics and how they do so is typically shaped to some extent by whether they have any hopes at all and, if so, what they hope for. In particular, it is hard to imagine anyone sustainably mustering the motivation to engage in the uncertain business of politics over an extended period of time from a position of utter hopelessness about whether their political activities will lead to a better future. Similarly, when there is an absence of hope for improvement in a political community, it seems likely that its members will disengage from politics at best, or engage in destructive forms of politics at worst.

This explains why political debates tend to concern not only what we ought to do and what we ought to desire, but also what we may hope for. These discussions often proceed from the assumption that citizens’ political hopes are a good that ought to be promoted. Rather than focusing on specific hopes, such discussions about ‘restoring hope’ usually proceed...
from the optimistic assumption that the prevalence of hope in general is a political good.

As Sarah Stitzlein (2020) has argued, the idea that hope is a basic political good is deeply embedded in American political rhetoric, finding its most radical version in one of Barack Obama’s campaign speeches. In it, Obama paints an unabashedly positive picture of hope’s role in politics:

> We’ve been asked to pause for a reality check. We’ve been warned against offering the people of this nation false hope. But in the unlikely story that is America, there has never been anything false about hope. (Obama, 2008, emphasis mine)

Here, hope is clearly described as a positive force, at least in American politics. While Obama’s claim that there has never been anything problematic about (presumably political) hopes in American history is clearly a rhetorical exaggeration, the general view that hope is a positive force in politics is widespread. After the Trump presidency’s break with the rhetoric of hope, Joe Biden explicitly took up the theme in his inaugural address again, identifying hope as a good of equal importance to democracy and justice (Biden, 2021). Similarly, the claim that hope is a necessary component of any political project is widespread (although not universally accepted) in the climate movement, with Greenpeace claiming that ‘hope is a natural resource too’ (Greenberg, 2023) and climate scientists opening a virtual ‘museum of climate hope’ to address the crisis (Fawcett et al., 2023).

Not only politicians and activists, but also philosophers from Kant and the American pragmatists to contemporary liberals have emphasized the positive contribution hope can make to political progress (Blöser & Stahl, 2022; Huber, 2021; Stitzlein, 2019). From this perspective, the promotion of civic hope seems to be a virtue and perhaps even an obligation for political institutions.

However, there are also more skeptical voices to be found. In the debate about the climate crisis, activists regularly warn against false hopes, in particular the hope that technological solutions or small-scale adjustments will suffice (Huber, 2023; Jensen, 2006). These warnings echo those of philosophers like Hobbes and Spinoza, who see hope as a dangerous force in politics that can promote wishful thinking and cannot provide a stable basis for political judgment (see Stahl, 2019, p. 267).

In this article, I want to examine one particular intuition voiced by critics of hope, concerning the ways in which hope can be inappropriate. While we can describe some hopes as defective in virtue of ordinary epistemic or practical considerations, there is also a widespread sense that some political hopes are problematic, not so much because they are inappropriate, taken in isolation, but because they serve as conduits of particular types of social power that contribute to ensuring the social subordination of those who entertain them.
In other words, hope is described – often together with ‘toxic positivity’ (Goodman, 2022) and ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant, 2011) – as a potential form of ideology (see Blöser et al., 2020, p. 2; Gatens et al., 2021, p. 228; Huber, 2021, p. 721, 2023, p. 91).

Although no general account of ideological hope is to be found in the literature to date, there are at least three political contexts in reference to which authors have laid out at least implicit conceptions of ideological hope, focusing on particular examples.

I take the first example from Calvin L. Warren’s ‘Black nihilism and the politics of hope.’ Warren here focuses on the hope entertained by Black U.S. citizens that, through their participation in politics, they will be able to contribute to overcoming Black subordination and suffering. On Warren’s view, not only is this hope unrealistic, but by accepting a certain idea of collective agency as part of ‘the Political’ it forecloses different conceptions and exercises of agency. Warren argues that the

politics of hope … bundles certain promises about redress, equality, freedom, justice and progress into a political object that always lies beyond reach…. [The pursuit of this object], however, is detrimental because it strengthens the very anti-black system that would pulverize black being. (Warren, 2015, p. 221)

A similar skepticism about hope can also be found in feminist scholarship. Claire Colebrook, for example, argues that certain

hopes can be both intoxicating, in their capacity to lure us into tolerating an existence that ought to be experienced as lifeless and stultifying, and toxic: decades of feminist criticism laboured to show the ways in which the consumption of certain images (especially images of the bodies that lead us to hope) precludes any possibility of an active female subject. (Colebrook, 2010, p. 328)

Here, the paradigmatic example of a form of ideological hope is some women’s hope that conforming to gendered norms will allow them to escape the disadvantages of their situation. This is again a form of hope that limits and distorts women’s conception of their own agency.

Finally, there is a sustained debate in climate activism about the value of hope. In this debate, some warn about the potentially ideological character of hope. At the most extreme end of the spectrum, Derrick Jensen has claimed that ‘hope is what keeps us chained to the system’ (Jensen, 2006), and the activist group Extinction Rebellion has adopted the motto ‘Hope dies – action begins’ (see also Huber, 2023).

The paradigmatic example of ideological hope here is the hope that climate activists will contribute to averting the worst outcomes of the crisis by cooperating or coordinating with those who are profiting from it. Here, we again find the suspicion that attempts to cultivate this kind of hope undermine a specific self-understanding of one’s agency within a context of social conflict. While all of these examples are, of course, subject to contested
interpretations, it is these intuitions that an account of ideological hope ought to capture.

Arguing that hope can be ideological means more than saying that people’s hopes can be influenced by exercises of social power or that they, in turn, make certain such exercises easier or harder. Clearly, people’s individual and collective hopes will always affect their capacity to act, and they often also make them vulnerable to others in distinctive ways. Therefore, hope and social power are always interlinked. To say that hope is a form of ideology is to refer to a more specific phenomenon. As these arguments suggest, some hopes may be politically inappropriate because they undermine our capacity to engage in political projects that we have reason to pursue and – insofar as this is the result of social factors – make us vulnerable to a specifically dominating form of power.

In this paper, I want to provide an analysis of ‘ideological hope’ that takes up this intuition. I argue that there are two major ways in which hope can be ideological. Hope can be derivatively ideological if it incorporates ideologically defective beliefs and judgments. But it can also be structurally (and thus non-derivatively) ideological if it distorts our political agency in a distinctive way.

The argument will proceed as follows: In section (‘Political Hope’), I will briefly survey the philosophical discussion on hope and argue that we can distinguish specifically political hopes as hopes for political outcomes that are held collectively on the basis of specifically political reasons. In section (‘Ideology’), I will introduce the central commitments of theories of ideology in order to examine whether their analyses can also be applied to hope. In section (‘Derivatively ideological hope’), I will argue that some hopes qualify as ideological (and not merely false or irrational) because of the ideological character of their underlying beliefs and desires. In section (‘Structurally ideological hope’), I will argue that there is another way for hopes to be ideological that does not require antecedent ideological hopes or desires. I argue that this form of ideology is relevant to a number of criticisms that have been raised against inappropriate hopes in politics.

**Political hope**

**Hope**

Hope is an attitude towards outcomes that we deem desirable but uncertain. We can only hope for what we neither believe to be impossible nor consider certain (Pettit, 2004, p. 153). Whereas optimism involves assigning a probability to a positive outcome that is at the upper end of the range of what it is permissible to believe (or even beyond what it is permissible to
believe, in the case of irrational optimism, hope is compatible with any judgment of probability, as long as one does not judge the outcome to be unattainable (see Moellendorf, 2022, p. 9).

The uncertainty involved in hope must be one that is in some way tied to factors beyond the hoping subject’s agency (Han-Pile, 2017). It makes sense for me to hope for a sunny summer, but it makes no sense for me to hope that I will cook dinner tonight (unless I suffer from a physical or mental condition that makes it uncertain whether I will be capable of doing so). We can only hope for what it is not completely up to us to bring about.

This explains one way in which hope is not purely incidentally connected to political agency. When acting politically, we always aim at outcomes – such as the exercise of political power or changes in the structure of society – which we can only bring about together with others whose contributions we do not control. Because we can never be confident that our political projects will be brought about merely by our deciding to act, political action creates situations to which hope is typically an appropriate reaction (Stahl, 2019, p. 265).

To better understand this relation between political agency and hope, it makes sense to briefly consider two possible strategies for analyzing hope philosophically. The first is represented by the so-called ‘standard’ or ‘orthodox’ account of hope. According to this account, hope is a composite state consisting in (1) a belief that an outcome O is possible but not certain and (2) a desire for O (Day, 1969, p. 89; Downie, 1963, p. 248; see also Han-Pile, 2017, p. 176; Stockdale, 2021, p. 14; Wheatley, 1957, p. 127).

The second strategy is represented by authors who propose that we add another element to the set of necessary and sufficient conditions. Typically, they begin with the observation that the standard account is unable to explain the fact that two people who share a belief in O’s possibility and a desire for O can nevertheless differ in how much they hope for it (Martin, 2013, pp. 14–15). Their sharing the same belief and desire is even compatible with one of them hoping for O and the other despairing (Meirav, 2009, pp. 222–223). Therefore, the belief and desire conditions cannot be sufficient on their own.

There are a number of suggestions in the literature regarding what is missing in the standard account (see Stockdale, 2021, p. 15). I will briefly discuss two accounts – which I consider to be the most plausible options in the debate – to show that my analysis does not depend on the particularities of any single account. The most prominent and promising account of a third condition is Martin’s suggestion that for an agent to hope is for that agent to ‘incorporate’ their attraction to O into their agency (Martin, 2013, p. 62). This means that they treat their attraction as a reason to engage in a range of activities (such as planning, fantasizing, and the like) and that they treat their belief in the possibility of O as sufficient for their being rationally licensed to
do so. A plausible alternative to Martin’s ‘incorporation account’ is Chignell’s suggestion that to hope is also (next to the relevant belief and desire) for the agent to be ‘disposed to focus on O under the aspect of unswamped possibility’ (Chignell, 2023, p. 53). ‘Unswamped possibility’ means here that the possibility of O is more salient to the agent than circumstances that could lead to O’s not obtaining.

Martin’s and Chignell’s analyses agree with many others on the idea that a hopeful agent not only exhibits the relevant beliefs and desires but also relates to them in a distinctive way – either treating them as reasons for typical mental activities or being disposed to focus on the outcome (and the belief and desire) in a certain way.

**Political hope**

In the current literature, hopes are usually characterized as political if they are directed towards political outcomes (Blöser et al., 2020; Stockdale, 2019). There is, however, a narrower way to use the term ‘political hope’ that picks out an especially important subset of such hopes.

As an individual, I may hope for various political outcomes without being able to act on my hopes. For example, I may have read about a war in a far-away country and may now hope that peace will return. I may be emotionally invested in a foreign politician’s election campaign even though I do not live in that country and perhaps do not even know anyone who lives there. In such cases, I hope for a political outcome that I individually prefer for moral, self-interested, or other reasons.

There is a significant difference between such hopes and the stronger form of political hope at issue in the debate about ‘political hope.’ If we ask about the function of political hope, we are typically concerned not with hopes held by individuals but, for example, with the kind of hope that could inspire members of a civil rights campaign, or the kind of hope that a large share of the citizenry might hold for their country’s future after liberation from a dictatorship.

In such cases, citizens hope not from the position of outside spectators but as members of the relevant community; they hope in a way that justifies the political projects in which they are engaged with others, and their hope is justified by the reasons that speak for engaging in these projects. This subset of hopes is characterized by two conditions: its collective character, and the political nature of the reasons that support it.

The collective character of political hope will play an essential role in my analysis of ideological hope, as will become apparent later. Although I will not develop a full theory of what it means to speak of collective hopes, I will briefly sketch the rough outlines of such a theory. As will become apparent, there is one distinctive sense in which hope can be ideological as part of
a group’s collective practices, a sense which only becomes apparent if we understand the idea of collective hope.

Belief in the possibility of the outcome is the least difficult aspect in this regard. Depending on which theory of shared or joint belief one finds plausible, one can say that a group shares a belief if it collectivizes its agency to the degree necessary to be able to decide which collective judgment on some proposition to endorse, as a group, whenever the need arises (Pettit, 2007, pp. 179–180), or if its members are jointly committed to accepting the relevant proposition as true (Gilbert, 1987, p. 195).

In comparison, the notion of a collective desire is more difficult to make plausible. Certainly, groups can have collectively adopted plans or be jointly committed to achieving certain outcomes. I do not think, however, that we can make much sense of the idea that groups genuinely collectively desire. Therefore, it may be better to assume that there are cases where groups adopt collective policies to treat certain desires held by some of their individual members as practical reasons for the group. Such policies can constitute functional equivalents of desires that are sufficient for ascribing hopes to the group.

This sketch supports a natural way of making sense of how groups can be said to hope in both Martin’s and Chignell’s sense. Following Martin, we might say that a group G collectively hopes for O if and only if: G collectively believes that O is possible but uncertain; G adopts a policy of treating (some of) its members’ attraction to O as reason-giving; and G treats its collective belief and this policy as a sufficient reason to incorporate this attraction in its collective agency. Alternatively, on a Chignellian account, we might say that G hopes for O if it not only collectively believes that O is possible and has adopted a policy of treating its members’ attraction to O as a reason to focus on O, but also has collective practices that dispose the group to do so in its collective activities.

On the basis of these considerations, I assume that there is a plausible sense in which hopes can be collectively shared. For an analysis of political hope, the question remains what it means to say that such collective hopes reflect political reasons. This assumes that the attraction towards the outcome (or the desire for it) is grounded in a judgment about reasons. While we may individually sometimes hope for an outcome without really being able to say why, this is very unlikely to be the case for political hopes. Typically, we assume that we can make our desire for political outcomes rationally understandable by explaining why we take ourselves to have reasons to pursue them. Such reasons are typically independent of our desiring the outcome. We pursue justice because it is morally required, or a solution to environmental risks because this will decrease the probability of widespread suffering, and so forth. In the case of political hopes, the reasons that justify the relevant attraction to the outcome are not reasons that only pertain to our
individual life projects or personal interests. Even if all members of a political community were to share such personal, non-political reasons (imagine, for example, a community where everyone hopes for some outcome because it would benefit the hobbies of the community members), such a hope, although a hope for a political outcome, would not be a hope that they share as a political community.

Political hopes in the narrow sense of collectively shared hopes for political outcomes that a group entertains for distinctively political reasons are a distinctive class of hopes, since they are amenable to a specific form of evaluation. We can ask about them not only in terms of the individual rationality of those who share them but also in terms of their political justification.

_Evaluating political hopes_

Most authors believe that people’s hopes are subject to evaluation regarding their rationality and reasonableness in a number of ways. If we endorse one of the theories that view hopes as having a belief and an attraction component, we can evaluate hopes by asking whether holding such attitudes and incorporating them into our agency is epistemically and practically rational (Blöser et al., 2020, p. 5).

One point concerns the rationality of hope, i.e. the question whether one’s hopes can be integrated without contradiction with one’s beliefs and desires. Hope is _epistemically irrational_ if it is based on a belief in the possibility of an outcome that the subject knows to be false, and it is _practically irrational_ if it is hope for an outcome the subject knows to be impossible (Martin, 2013, p. 114). Hope can also be said to be practically irrational in another sense, if it is hope for an outcome the subject is repulsed by (one could, for example, entertain a ‘recalcitrant hope’ that is motivated by a compulsive desire that one repudiates; see Chignell, 2023, p. 50; Milona, 2019, p. 718).

Another set of questions concern the reasonableness of hope – i.e. whether one’s hopes (even if consistent with the other attitudes that one may have) display sufficient sensitivity to reason-giving considerations (see Rawls, 1992, p. 51; Howard, 2019, pp. 301–302). Hope is _epistemically unreasonable_, by contrast, if it is based on a belief in the outcome’s possibility that was formed in a way that was not appropriately responsive to the facts.

These considerations largely transfer to collective agents. However, there are some differences between the individual and the collective case. First, while in the case of individual agents an outcome’s possibility is often (though not always) independent of their attitudes, collective hopes may contribute to the emergence of new kinds of agents, such that formerly unfeasible actions become feasible. Therefore, hope that is targeted at an outcome that cannot be realized by a currently existing agent need not be
epistemically unreasonable if adopting it could contribute to the emergence of an agent who can realize the relevant outcome.

Second, it is a matter of debate in the individual case whether we can evaluate our being attracted to an outcome not only in terms of rationality but also in terms of reasonableness. This concerns the question whether our attraction to an outcome always incorporates a judgment to the effect that we have a reason to be attracted to the outcome. There may be cases of individual hope where we believe that an outcome is possible and are attracted to it just because we ‘feel like it’ (Chang, 2004, p. 72), without being able to point to any underlying reason for doing so. I will leave open whether such cases of individual hope can ever be truly rational. In the case of political hope, however, I assume that there are no interesting cases of collectives hoping to pursue political outcomes merely because they collectively ‘feel like it.’ Political hope typically involves a group’s endorsement of (some of) its members’ attractions for distinctively political reasons. Therefore, we can intelligibly ask whether a group’s motivating reasons are also reasons in the normative sense, and if they are the right kind of reasons.

Another dimension on which we can evaluate both individual and collective hopes is whether there is enough reason to hope, given the underlying belief and attraction. We might say that hope is practically irrational in a sense that differs from those senses described above if an agent hopes while simultaneously judging that they ought not to engage in typically hopeful mental activities, or ought not to focus in the distinctive way on the outcome, but still incorporates these attitudes into their agency or refrains from trying to change their relevant dispositions. We may also say that hope is practically unreasonable if the agent does not fully appreciate the moral, instrumental or other reasons that speak against doing so.

While moral reasons not to hope are likely to be coextensive with moral reasons not to be attracted to the outcome at issue (or at least with reasons not to cultivate the relevant attraction), there are also distinctive practical reasons not to hope that apply to the political case.

Martin (2013, p. 37) argues that we should understand the rationality of incorporation in terms of ‘considerations of rational ends-promotion.’ Moellendorf (2020, p. 254) similarly argues that all hope comes with opportunity costs in terms of what else we might focus on psychologically. Therefore, we can always ask whether a given hope crowds out forms of mental engagement that could promote our ends better, even if it is based on rational beliefs and morally and pragmatically permissible forms of attraction. For example, consider an adolescent’s hope that they will achieve success and security in life by becoming a famous musician or athlete. Even if we admit that the outcome is possible and (perhaps more questionably) desirable, we may still describe such hopes as irrational, since they involve spending mental
energy on this outcome and thereby impose the opportunity cost of not spending mental energy on other hopes that would perhaps better promote the agent’s interests.

These considerations clearly also apply to the political case. We may consider it permissible for a social movement to believe that it might succeed in promoting justice because it is possible that its opponents could have a moral epiphany. We might also agree that such an outcome would be highly desirable but still argue that cultivating hope for such an outcome is unreasonable for a social movement since that movement’s purposes would be better served by cultivating other hopes that could inspire their members to act more effectively to promote justice.

As Blöser and Stahl (2017) argue, not all evaluations of the reasonableness of hope relate to the promotion of ends. Individual agents can also have a reason to hope if their hopes are constitutive of an identity which they have reason to preserve. For example, hoping for the future well-being of one’s children may be constitutive of being a parent, and it may be that parents have a moral reason to sustain such hopes even if their hoping has no effect on others. As I will discuss in section ‘Structurally ideological hope’, it is also true of political movements that some of their hopes may make them the particular kind of group agent they are, and thus we must also subject the constitutive role of hope to rational scrutiny.

In summary, there are a range of considerations to which we appeal when distinguishing rational and reasonable hopes from those that lack sufficient reason or are held irrationally. But there are a range of criticisms of political hope that do not immediately appeal to standards of rationality and reasonableness and that are framed in the language of ideology.

In the introduction, I cited three examples of ideological hopes from three different political contexts: Warren’s Afropessimist example of agency-distorting Black hopes, Colebrook’s example of women’s distorted hopes under conditions of gender subordination, and the example of counterproductive climate hope. In all three cases, the central intuition is not that these hopes are defective because they are based on unreasonable beliefs about the possibility of such outcomes or irrational desires for them. It is also not evident that entertaining such hopes is always practically irrational. Rather, the most plausible interpretation of these critiques is that such hopes tie us to political identities that we have reason to reject (or no reason to preserve) and that we have distinctly political reasons to reject these identities because they are themselves a product of social power (in Jensen’s words, they ‘tie us to the system’). This is the intuition that such hopes may be ideological.
**Ideology**

Taking the conception of political hope developed in section ‘Political Hope’ as a starting point, what does it mean to say that some political hopes are *ideological* (rather than just unreasonable or irrational)?

We can answer this question by drawing on a tradition of normative ideology critique that has for the most part focused not on hope but on other attitudes and intentional states such as belief or desire (see Haslanger, 2020, p. 71). In this tradition, it is generally acknowledged that, for example, widely shared social beliefs are not ideological merely because they are false or unjustified (Rosen, 1996, p. 34). Rather, we describe a community’s belief system as ideological if their beliefs are entangled in a distinctive sense with social power.

This can be spelled out by building on two ideas. First, to characterize a set of beliefs as ‘ideological’ is to say that, as far as they are false or distorted, this is not the result of mere bad epistemic luck and that the process by which they were formed was shaped and distorted, in some sense, by the influence of social power. In the Marxist tradition in which many theories of ideology are situated, this is often described as a ‘materialist’ commitment (Mau, 2022, p. 111; Shelby, 2003, p. 185). This is the idea that our cognitive and epistemic practices are not independent of wider ‘material’ – that is, not purely epistemic or cognitive – social practices. While this tradition assumes that all cognitive phenomena (and thus, at least implicitly, all hopes) are embedded in material practices, the notion of ideology is often used to distinguish specifically problematic ways in which this can happen. While such an analysis of ideology remains descriptive, it is geared towards identifying normatively relevant features.

The materialist commitment is particularly well suited to explaining two features of ideology. First, material factors explain particularly well why ideological beliefs (and other attitudes) are especially stable even when subjected to rational criticism (Stanley, 2015, pp. 178, 185). This stability would be hard to explain if ideological beliefs (for example) were to be explained purely in terms of the epistemic situation of those who hold them. Second, to describe a system of beliefs as ideological is to describe it not merely as an epiphenomenal effect of the structures of social domination but as a feature of social reality that itself plays a causal role in the reproduction of these structures. Ideologies are typically seen as material forces in themselves.

To identify what is problematic about ideology in general, and to examine whether the same criteria could also apply to hope, it is useful to briefly survey some of the most important options that have emerged in the tradition of ideology theory. I will first briefly discuss a widely accepted standard set of necessary and sufficient conditions for ideology and then distinguish
two ways of spelling out these conditions – one that is focused on false beliefs, and one that is focused on conceptual distortions. I will argue that the second model is more promising for an analysis of hope than its competitor.

It is widely held that for a cognitive phenomenon – such as a belief, attitude, or concept – to count as ideological, it has to meet three conditions (Geuss, 1981; Shelby, 2003). First, it needs to be false or distorted in some sense; second, it needs to have the effect of contributing to the persistence of an (unjust) social structure in virtue of these distortions; and third, its distorting features must in some way have been caused by a social mechanism that is epistemically unreliable.

For example, we will typically be inclined to describe a dominant group’s belief that those who are disadvantaged in society deserve their disadvantage as ideological because (and insofar as) this belief is false; because it tends to help them avoid the cognitive dissonance that arises from viewing themselves as morally good while actually supporting an unjust structure; and because we see it as caused by motivated reasoning that, in turn, is explained by their privilege and their distance from the effects of their actions.

While it is easy to find examples of self-serving beliefs held by members of privileged groups, there is little consensus in the philosophical literature and in social psychology regarding whether ideologically false beliefs also explain the more puzzling phenomenon of members of subordinated groups sometimes seeming to support the very social structures that disadvantage them or not resisting their subordination as effectively. It is unclear whether attributing false beliefs to members of such groups is a good explanation of this phenomenon. In particular, it is often argued that the complicity of the subordinated and their lack of resistance are sufficiently well explained by coordination problems and do not require the implausible assumption that the oppressed are systematically ignorant about their situation (Rosen, 1996). In social psychology, there are similarly influential accounts that explain disadvantaged groups’ support for the social systems in which they live through their (not obviously irrational) identification with a larger group to which they belong and to their hope that compliance will be the most effective means of securing future benefits (Owumalam et al., 2019). In addition, the false belief hypothesis seems to describe oppressed groups as fundamentally epistemically defective and could motivate authoritarian approaches (Haslanger, 2017, pp. 14–16). Finally, it often does not sufficiently explain why, even when the ideological support for social systems is based on false beliefs, these beliefs are surprisingly stable in the face of counterevidence. This remains difficult to explain in the absence of an assumption to the effect that the oppressed are simply incapable of adequately responding to evidence or are irrationally unwilling to do so.
For this reason, a number of philosophers and social theorists have suggested that the epistemically defective component is not false beliefs (which are attributable to individuals) but defective conceptual resources (Hall, 1986; Haslanger, 2017; Stahl, 2024). This suggestion amounts to the idea that people can be epistemically constrained in their attempts to make sense of their situation if they use conceptual resources that obscure relevant aspects of reality. If we assume that conceptual resources are typically socially shared and not under the control of individuals, this offers an explanation of ideological effects that does not require us to attribute any defects to individuals’ epistemic capacities, that explains ideological stability, and that suggests non-authoritarian political strategies.

For these reasons, I will assume that ideologies are, at their core, a matter of distorted conceptual resources the dominance of which in a given social context has the effect of making people in general, and members of subordinated groups in particular, less able to make sense of their social situation and to effectively pursue their political goals than they would otherwise be, and that the relevant distortions are in some sense the outcome of epistemic and conceptual hierarchies and rules that are ultimately explained by underlying material hierarchies (for a concrete proposal for how to make sense of this last ‘materialist’ assumption, see Stahl, 2013, 2024).

Not every unhelpful set of conceptual resources that is socially shaped (as all conceptual resources necessarily are) is an ideology, however. A set of conceptual resources is only ideological if it systematically obstructs a reflexive evaluation of its usefulness (see Stahl, 2024, p. 149). This is particularly true of conceptual resources that promote understandings of reality in which the relevant concepts are themselves presented as merely mirroring objective facts, without disclosing the degree of freedom that linguistic communities have in choosing how to conceptually represent the world.

For the argument I will develop in the next two sections, it is important to highlight that distorted, reflexivity-inhibiting conceptual resources obstruct people not only in their attempts to make sense of the social reality around them but also in their attempts to make sense of their own agency, that is, in their attempts adequately to understand what kind of agents they are, by what forces their agency is shaped, and what sort of agent they could potentially be. This captures an important dimension of ideology that is associated with Louis Althusser’s famous claim that ideology works primarily through the subject (Althusser, 1970/2001). But while Althusser is committed to the idea that the very idea of subjecthood intrinsically imposes ideas of responsibility and morality on subjects that subordinate them to the dominant social system, one need
not agree with this perspective to make sense of this dimension of ideology.

Rather, the three examples discussed in the introduction – ideological hopes that undermine political agency in conflicts about racial oppression, gendered norms, and the climate crisis – suggest the more moderate claim that, in these cases, the conceptual resources that inform agents’ understanding of their subjectivity are such that they do not allow those agents to view themselves as having the political agency they could have and do not disclose the opportunities available to them to reflect on the concepts that shape their self-understanding.

**Derivatively ideological hope**

Hopes are *derivatively ideological* if their ideological character derives from the ideological character of their underlying beliefs, desires, and practical judgments. The first category of derivatively ideological hopes encompasses hopes that are constituted by ideological beliefs. Of course, the easiest cases are hopes that rely on straightforwardly false beliefs about an outcome’s possibility if those beliefs are explained by people’s being misled by defective conceptual resources.

Consider, for example, the homophobic hope that children will not grow up to develop a gay or lesbian identity if they are not exposed to knowledge about such identities. Apart from being defective in virtue of relying on an unjustifiable judgment to the effect that it would be desirable to ‘protect’ children from becoming gay or lesbian, such a hope is also defective because it relies on the straightforwardly false belief that withholding information from children will ensure this outcome. This false belief is in turn best explained by conceptual resources that describe LGBTQ identities as mere ‘fads.’

Yet we might also think of hopes that are guided by beliefs in an event’s possibility that are not literally false but where that possibility becomes salient in a way that is best explained by the believer’s being guided by an ideological conceptual scheme (see Stockdale, 2021, p. 70 for an example). Assume, for example, that someone believes that members of a certain social group are more likely to commit certain crimes and hopes that the rate of such crimes will not further rise in the future. Here, the underlying belief in current crime rates and the possibility belief may be true. What is problematic about the relevant form of hope is that this way of conceptualizing the possibility of the hoped-for outcome makes group membership *salient* in a way that makes it harder for the agent who is motivated by that hope to contribute rationally to securing that outcome. Because the conceptual resources at issue tend to lead people into believing in a false theory
regarding the causes of crime, the relevant form of hope does not make it probable that they will focus on the most rational ways to promote the outcome.

A second category of derivatively ideological hopes encompasses hopes that are constituted by ideological desires. Unlike ideological beliefs, the existence of which is generally accepted, it remains a matter of dispute whether there are such things as ideological desires.

If we take desires to involve beliefs about reasons to act, they are open to rational evaluation, either regarding their truth or regarding the normative standards that apply to perception. On such a view, we can say that the capacity of these beliefs to correctly represent the world at least partly depends on the concepts in which we frame them. When Colebrook (2010, p. 328) describes, for example, the ‘hope for a richer boyfriend, a larger pair of breasts, a slimmer pair of thighs and an even more unattainable handbag of the day’ as something women have reason to reject, one can naturally understand this as involving the idea that the underlying desires are defective because they misrepresent the reasons that women have to pursue these outcomes. Defective conceptual resources promote such misrepresentations if they involve normative concepts that enable defective inferences.

By contrast, if one thinks of desires or attractions as ‘subrational’ states of attraction (Martin, 2013, p. 58) – that is, inclinations or ways of being moved that only become justifying if we also endorse them – then a desire cannot be meaningfully said to be distorted. At most, we might say that agents have no reason to endorse certain desires if it is not in their interest to be affected by them.

However, even on such an understanding of desires, we can still think of them as at least indirectly ideological when the attraction at issue is triggered by the agents’ seeing the relevant objects in a distinct way that is affected by an ideological conceptual frame. Imagine, for example, a social community in which it is largely acceptable to divide women into categories such as ‘fun girls’ and ‘feminist killjoys’ (Ahmed, 2010, p. 65). Even when a given woman’s desire to be counted as one of the ‘fun girls’ does not involve a representation of reasons, we can still assume that the way in which social recognition in such a community is structured promotes the relevant desires.

If one accepts Martin’s incorporation analysis, there is also a third category of derivatively ideological hopes. This category is that of hopes that are constituted by ideologically distorted judgments to the effect that a certain combination of a belief in an outcome’s possibility and an attraction to that outcome licenses and justifies a given instance of hope. As discussed in section ‘Political Hope’, it is widely accepted that such judgments can be wrong or inappropriate if they crowd out more desirable forms of mental engagement. An incorrect judgment to the effect that we have reasons to endorse the attraction involved in practically unreasonable hopes may also be an effect of the employment of
ideologically distorted conceptual resources. For example, if one describes those who adjust their hopes over the course of their lives as ‘quitters,’ that unhelpful concept may draw one’s attention away from the virtues of being realistic.

Of course, hopes can be derivatively ideological not merely in one of these respects but in several at the same time. In all cases, however, the ideological character of hope is best explained as an effect of the ideological character of an underlying belief or attitude that is – in principle – intelligible independently of whether such an element contributes to ideological hope.

**Structurally ideological hope**

So far, I have argued that people sometimes entertain unreasonable hopes due to ideological distortions of their beliefs, desires, and norms of reasoning. In this section, I will argue that there are also cases of non-derivatively ideological hope. Since such hope is ideological not in virtue of the ideological feature of its component attitudes but in virtue of the way the hope structures an agent’s self-conception, I call it ‘structurally ideological hope.’

Normally, we assume that an individual’s hope is something they can lose without becoming a different kind of agent. In other words, in the case of individuals, their hopes are often not essential to their being the agents they are. As discussed in section ‘Political Hope’, Blöser and Stahl (2017) argue with regard to individual hopes that this is not always the case: some hopes may also be constitutive of an agent’s identity. This is also frequently the case for collective agents. For political movements, political parties or even small activist groups, certain kinds of hopes may be constitutive of their being a certain kind of collective, political agent. A political party may, for example, be defined by the fact that it is animated by a collective hope that it will one day exercise political power. Of course, this collective hope may one day disappear, but in that case it is plausible to say that the party would then be a different kind of organization (such as an advocacy organization). The same holds true for less formally organized social movements as well.

In the vast majority of such cases, the collective hopes that are constitutive of a given political agent are hopes for the success of that agent’s projects. In theory, it may be possible for people to form a political group agent for whom a hope directed towards an outcome to which they cannot or do not plan to contribute is constitutive, but such cases are almost nowhere to be found in political reality.

The hope that one will be able to successfully pursue one’s projects is always tied to a certain understanding of one’s agency. Therefore, the collective hopes of political agents are always grounded in an understanding that they have a certain kind of political agency. Such an understanding may be ideological not only because it is based on a belief that is ideological in the independent sense discussed thus far but because this understanding
supports and reinforces what it is an understanding of, that is, a particular kind of agency, and because it may have ideological effects in virtue of doing so.

I will therefore say that a group $G$ has a particularly important kind of political hope for an outcome, namely a political hope that constitutes $G$ as a political agent, if and only if:

1. the members of $G$ share a belief to the effect that it is possible to collectively achieve a political outcome $O$;
2. the members of $G$ collectively judge that achieving $O$ is desirable for political reasons;
3. the members of $G$ collectively take (1) to be licensing and (2) to justify a range of hopeful collective, political activities (or members of $G$ endorse (2) as part of practices in which the group focuses on the outcome under the aspect of possibility, based on (1)); and
4. on the basis of (1)–(3), the members of $G$ unify their agency such that the hope for $O$ is essential to their shared conception of what kind of agent they are.

Such agent-constitutive hopes can, of course, be defective in the derivative sense discussed in the previous section. For example, a political party may falsely believe that it will be able to negotiate away its country’s debt, or a militant movement may falsely believe that it will be able to win a civil war against the government, and these hopes may become constitutive of their identity. This, again, can conceivably be an effect of their thinking’s being framed within an ideological conceptual scheme.

However, agent-constitutive hopes can also be defective in another, non-derivative way. This is because different kinds of hopes will lead people to form different kinds of group agents – consider the differences in character between parties, movements, militant groups, unions, and research institutes. Therefore, we can ask not only whether a given hope is appropriate in terms of its underlying beliefs and judgments, but also whether the form of agency of the agent it constitutes is one that distorts or constrains our pursuits of political goals. This, I take it, is what Lauren Berlant refers to in Cruel Optimism when she examines ‘the conditions under which certain attachments . . . work against the flourishing of particular and collective beings’ (Berlant, 2011, p. 13).

In section ‘Ideology’, I argued that one particular way in which ideological conceptual schemes can affect us is by shaping how we understand our agency as individuals. This argument can also be extended to groups. Ideological concepts shape how we understand the agency of the actual or potential groups to which we belong (or which may emerge in the future). To use an example introduced by Charles Mills, our vocabulary may presuppose
an ideological social ontology that describes all social phenomena as exchanges between individuals or as cooperative (Mills, 2005, p. 168). Such a vocabulary will make it hard for us to appropriately understand deeply rooted social conflicts. Or consider a vocabulary that describes all social action in terms of personal preference and strategic rationality. Such a vocabulary will make it hard for us to describe political processes that serve a deliberative function and whose primary purpose is to allow for debates that enable participants to rationally revise their preferences. In other words, ideological vocabularies may unduly restrict our imagination regarding what forms of collective political agency are possible, desirable, or legitimate.

How we conceive of the space of political agency is, of course, not independent of the hopes that shape the process of becoming a political agent, since we develop our political hopes always already with reference to the forms of political agency that we see as possible and desirable. Therefore, our conception of political agency will affect which political agency – grounding hopes we individually have, as well as the hopes that animate the political agents who will actually emerge. It is therefore conceivable that there are collective political agents whose constitutive hopes are ideological not because they reflect ideological beliefs or attractions or because the members of that group have reason to reject them as constitutive of the agents they are, but because they were formed under the influence of an ideological distortion of the group’s understanding of what kinds of collective agency are available and desirable.

Consider again the three examples that the authors cited in the introduction refer to: Black U.S. citizens’ (alleged) hope to overcome their subordination by cooperatively participating in political practices that are (at least, as described by the Afropessimist position) structurally tied to that very subordination; women’s hope to overcome disadvantage by conforming to gender norms; and the hope of a subset of climate activists to avert the worst outcomes of the climate crisis by cooperating or advising those who are profiting from that very crisis.

Because I cannot do justice to the empirical complexity of these phenomena here, I want to make clear that I refer to them only because I want to capture the general intuitions of authors who (rightly or wrongly) describe them as instances of ideological hope. In each of these cases, the problem that the authors I refer to diagnose is not best understood as a false belief to the effect that the outcome at issue is possible or as an unreasonable or irrational desire for that outcome. The problem, rather, is that such beliefs and desires can contribute to the emergence of a collective agent with a distorted understanding of its agency.

In particular, if such hopes distort the self-understanding of the group at issue such that it becomes systematically obstructed in its ability to conceive of
its political agency in any other way than as the ability to petition dominant groups, conforming to their expectations or cooperating with them (as opposed to consciously pretending to buy into this belief for purely strategic reasons), then we may legitimately describe its hope as ideologically distorted. The most important reason to do so is that this inability will lead to a group’s being systematically obstructed in its ability to contest the structural conditions under which it operates.

On the basis of these considerations, I propose that an agent-constitutive political hope held by a group $G$ for an outcome $O$ is a case of structurally ideological political hope if and only if:

1. the conception that members of $G$ have of $G$’s political agency, and the ways in which $G$ can rationally or legitimately exercise it, is structured by an ideologically distorted conceptual scheme;
2. the fact that the members of $G$ exercise their collective political agency in that particular way stabilizes the wider underlying context of domination that partly explains the existence of the scheme in (1);
3. in the absence of ideological constraints, members of $G$ would be able to contemplate the possibility of other forms of political agency, and if they were to do so, there are at least some conceivable circumstances in which they would be able to pursue their interests more effectively;
4. $G$’s shared hope for $O$ stabilizes the dominance of the ideological conceptual scheme in (1); and
5. $G$’s shared hope for $O$ is an agent-constitutive hope for $G$. It at least partly explains the emergence of $G$’s particular form of political agency, including the conception of it that defines it.

Conditions (1) to (3) describe what it means to speak of ideology in terms of a conception of political agency, and (4) and (5) describe how this kind of agency can be dependent on shared hopes. If these conditions hold, we can describe political hopes as ideological.

**Conclusion**

I have defended an analysis of ideological hope that identifies a distinctive defect of political hopes that is tied to the way in which shared hopes structure the agency of political groups. In particular, I have argued that there is a plausible sense in which groups can entertain collective hopes. Collective hopes can be based on distorted conceptual resources and thus be ideological, even in cases where the beliefs and desires that underlie them are not defective. Such ideological conceptual resources can then
play a role not merely as ideological components of hope but as a factor that constitutes the particular form of agency that political group agents adopt.

This analysis of ideological hope plausibly captures what the critiques of hope introduced at the beginning of this article – the Afropessimist, the feminist, and the climate activist critiques of hope – aim at: they all reject hope due to the way in which it binds individual and collective subjects to forms of agency that subordinate them.

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**Notes on contributor**

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