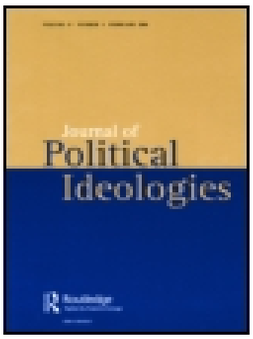

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Ideology and political theory

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ABSTRACT *Ideology, and its study, have been subject to an interpretational tug-of-war among political theorists that, until recently, has devalued their status as an object of scholarship. Disputes have raged over the scientific standing of ideology, its epistemological status, and its totalitarian and liberal manifestations. Many political philosophers have eschewed its group orientation, and the more recent interest of students of ideology in ordinary political language and in the unconscious and the indeterminate. Following an historical survey of changing fashions and more durable features in the analysis of ideology, it is argued that ideology should be explored as the most typical form of political thinking, and that its study conducts political theorists to the heart of the political. Ideology is now seen as ubiquitous, while the methodologies through which ideologies are studied take on board conceptual malleability and ideational pluralism, and offer bridges between identifying 'social facts' and their inevitable interpretation.*

Ideology: The problem-child of political analysis

We are saddled with a difficult word, 'ideology'. Here is a term once designed to signify the study of ideas, even the science of ideas, yet it has come to denote one area of the domain it is supposed to study (the word 'politics' has, at many UK departments of politics, curiously travelled in the opposite trajectory). Moreover, as a term invoking a subject-matter the word 'ideology' has proved to be very off-putting for the general public—the combination of ideas and 'logies' seems to indicate the kind of high abstraction that is remote from the experience and the language of regular people, even though it is the latter on which ideology studies have come to be chiefly focused. In the Anglo-American world, with its naïve

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myths of political pragmatism, ideology is all too often an alien implant, something concocted by spinners of dreams, otherworldly intellectuals, or machinators with totalitarian designs. In the European mainland, with its far greater familiarity with abstract theorizing, ideology is an obnoxious kind of grand theory attached particularly to its tempestuous early and mid-20th century history in which fascists faced communists in a bid to dominate the world. Intellectually, the reception of ideology has been inspired by the theoreticians who, following Marx and Engels, became its sworn enemies.

Nevertheless, the term is very common, though not beloved, among scholars, writers and academics, and it has an illustrious pedigree, although regrettably also a notorious one. If, as Max Lerner stated, ideas are weapons,[1] ideology (in the singular) is a loose cannon when used professionally. We find it in the 'slash and destroy' mode when used to rubbish another point of view. Daniel Bell referred to the 'trap of ideology', to 'apocalyptic fervour' and 'dreadful results' and to ideologists as 'terrible simplifiers'.[2] We encounter it as if behind a magic screen, whose removal suddenly enables the initially hidden and pernicious attributes of a doctrine, Weltanschauung or set of social practices to become hideously exposed by the knowledgeable ideology-critic, much as the Emperor's new clothes dissolved through the eyes of a child. Marx and Engels wrote of ideology as an upside-down sublimation, a set of 'reflexes and echoes of [the] life process', of 'phantoms formed in the human brain' detached from the world. Describing the ruling class as 'conceptive ideologists, who make the perfecting of the illusion of the class about itself their chief source of livelihood', they saw the demystification and consequent elimination of ideology as dependent not only on the actual ending of class rule, but on the intellectual process of 'outing' ideology: 'One must separate the ideas of those ruling for empirical reasons, under empirical conditions and as empirical individuals, from these actual rulers, and thus recognize the rule of ideas or illusions in history'.[3]

We meet ideology as an instrument of 'totalitarian seduction', an all-encompassing system of ideas based on a 'single truth' and a drive for self-justification, primarily representative of the 20th century.[4] We also come across it as a lazy synonym for any set of ideas (historians are occasionally guilty of that). We encounter it in endless textbooks as a simple descriptor for a discrete set of major political belief systems, invariably including liberalism, conservatism, socialism, fascism and the rest of the pack. And, of course, we discover it—thoroughly demonstrated by the collection of articles in this issue and the next—as a fundamental and variegated feature of social life, opened up to sophisticated scrutiny through increasingly refined tools of analysis that are employed by different disciplines to further their understanding of the areas they investigate.

Among political theorists, ideology is buffeted by the winds of academic fashion, reflecting not only substantive foci of interest but reigning methodologies—indeed, almost a justification of the dominant ideology thesis itself, in the shape of 'dominant methodologies' concealed from many of their users. At one point in time we find it caught in the debate over whether the study of politics is a science or an art. At another it appears against the backdrop of

a liberalism fighting to retrieve ground against the twin onslaughts of communism and fascism. At a third, it falls prey to the methodological individualism that has typified much Western—and especially American—social science. At a fourth point, it is appropriated by a convergence of new developments in linguistics, philosophy and psychology to recover its Marxist critical edge—critical, however, in the sense that it is once again exposed as a dissimulative device. But those developments also encourage a critical stance in a non-Marxist sense, as a reflective exploration of the features of ideology. And at a fifth point, it is reconstructed as the most typical and accessible form of political thinking. In between it has been pronounced dead—twice!—and resurrected—twice!—thus outclassing one central creed of a well-established religion, religion of course being a set of beliefs and practices with which ideology is sometimes thought to be in competition.

No wonder then that political theorists, chiefly political philosophers, are baffled. For political philosophers who have been trained to identify, explore and prescribe enduring truths, sustained by reason or by logic, such vacillation is difficult to tolerate. The fact of two-pronged change—in the nature of the substantive content of ideologies and in the nature of the methodologies to which the term 'ideology' is harnessed—is unpalatable for universalizers and purveyors of eternal truths, but quite common among social scientists possessing an historical or comparative sense. For universalizers, change is either deviant or the teleological unfolding of an emerging constant. Moreover, the vital dual distinction between an ideology on the one hand and its students on the other also explains another perennial confusion reigning among philosophical critics of ideology. They fail to distinguish between a condemnation of the ideas conveyed by ideologies (because, in the opinion of such critics, they are sloppy, simplistic, malign, or emotional) and a disavowal of the scholarly practice of studying ideologies that runs something like this: 'How can serious scholars bother to investigate such inferior forms of thinking, let alone learn something from them? Surely the results of such research cannot rise above the paucity of the material!'. Analytical and ethical philosophers are not used to detaching themselves from the object of their study, having sought out *a priori* only its most superior instances with which they can in principle empathize, and believing to have included their own cogitations seamlessly within the compass of their subject-matter.[5] Within their discipline, the detachment that distinguishes between participants and observers, if present, is the province of historians of philosophy, a minority taste.

Nor can it be denied that the concept of ideology as the wielding of pernicious power still has a hold on political theorists. They require a term to express and denounce systemic abuse and obfuscation through the force of superimposed ideas, at some remove from what 'actually is', and 'ideology' has served them well as a word, even though abuse and obfuscation are contingent features of power. However, while the substantive concreteness of ideology mutates and the quality of its products fluctuates, it is—notwithstanding the Marxists or the analytical and ethical philosophers—a universal phenomenon of immeasurable significance to the study of politics. That is an immense challenge to political theorists, among

which students of ideology are to be counted as full and core members: to reclaim the high ground of first-rate analysis when it comes to ideology while insisting on its crucial centrality to understanding politics and thinking about politics, without being contaminated either by scholarly prejudices or by the rather slippery nature of the concept, and ephemerality of some of the phenomena, that ideology signifies.

Studying ideology: A scientific endeavour?

The above settings to ideology merit scrutiny in greater detail. If Destutt de Tracy aspired to create a science of ideology, of judging and reasoning, of knowing how our ideas were formulated and then directing them to produce happiness,[6] more recent views have contrasted ideology with science or, more specifically, with the empiricism at the heart of science. When positioning ideology on an epistemological dimension, its antecedents reflect the 19th-century positivist legacy concerning the status of the social sciences that was still debated animatedly until the 1970s and the arrival of the so-called 'linguistic turn'. A typical case in point is Sartori, locating ideology—as did Marx from a very different perspective—on a truth-error dichotomy, and contrasting it specifically with 'science and valid knowledge', questioning its applicability to 'the real world' because it did not 'fall under the jurisdiction of logic and verification'.[7] That perspective related to predominant mid-century views about the closed totality of ideology—deductive, rationalistic and non-empirical, a state of 'dogmatic impermeability both to evidence and to argument'.[8] Recall also the approach of Karl Popper in *The Open Society and its Enemies*, for whom the scientific method and its objectivity, attained through public critique, testing and replicability, offered the only protection from Mannheimian 'total ideologies', under which Popper included 'our own system of prejudices' and 'ideological follies'.[9] Mere knowledge of our ideological biases, as exposed by Marx and Mannheim, seemed to Popper to proffer no hope of getting rid of them. But getting rid of them was still the crux of the matter.

For political theorists following that route, ideology signalled dalliance with illiberal, unsubstantiated and flawed ways of thinking, and the clear message was yet again: 'keep away if you have any claims to scholarship', now understood as the striving for empirically falsifiable knowledge rather than the philosophers' insistence on the deductive nature of analysis. In the words of one such representative of the positivist approach: 'We sceptics, therefore, offer the world not an ideology but an anti-ideology. We really do believe in reason, to which the ideologists pay lip-service only; we believe, that is, in the reason that proves its worth in science; we believe in empirical reason, pragmatic reason … In that specific sense, it sets men free'.[10]

On the other side of the debate was a growing tendency to accord ideology serious standing, but only through narrowing its domain to that of observable representations of social reality. Instead of shying away from a phenomenon pronounced too unscientific to matter, or too unpleasant to approach, many

scholars now agreed that whatever its inchoate nature, and whatever the messages it conveyed, ideology could be *studied* scientifically or, rather, its external and visible symptoms could. In a trend report published by Norman Birnbaum in 1960,[11] a case was made for the sociological study of ideology, though it also referred more broadly to its psychological bases through Freud and Erikson. Noting the 'evolution of ideology into science' and the 'bracketing ' of theoretical issues of ideology in the mid-20th century,[12] Birnbaum emphasized the empirical and behaviourist facets of ideology: mass communications and mass society (Riesman); anthropology, in particular myths, symbols and language (Lévi-Strauss); attitude studies and political behaviour surveys, employing aggregating and disaggregating quantitative findings (Robert E. Lane).

That kind of science was also outside the orbit of political theory—at the time still largely focused on the historical study of individuals or on perennial and decontextualized conceptual and philosophical issues—because it abandoned the grand theorizing to which political theorists had become habituated, and because much of it relied on the budding quantitative approaches developing in political science that were seen as increasingly impenetrable by, or irrelevant for, political theorists. The 'empiricism' of political theorists, for what it was worth, related rather to the study of past iconic individuals and their texts. Alternatively, empiricism was eschewed altogether in favour of theories of the good life and exercises in utopia. Political theorists knew that ideologies existed, but could not find a way to incorporate them into their scholarship—after all, they were produced by ideologues, a perverted and mischievous form of intellectual lowlife. And they had nothing to say about ideology as a concept, because it appeared to fail both tests of normative significance and of academic relevance. The epistemology of political theory and its status were not an issue for most theorists; they were simply participating in a proud practice in which distinguished thinkers had engaged from the times of the ancient Greeks. Moreover, any recognition that ideologies were phenomena worthy of investigation by political theorists was partly blocked by the contentions of scholars inspired by the social criticism of the Frankfurt School. They displayed the misguided suspicion that to be interested in the here and now betrayed an innate conservatism. In Birnbaum's apt words, it was a 'disdain for that sort of sociological description which legitimates what it describes, by refusing to acknowledge that things could be otherwise'.[13] Exploring the present does not, however, rule out exploring a different present at any future point and asking what has changed and why.

The battle of ideologies and their competing epistemologies

There was another setting to the standing of ideology in political theory. The immediate pre- and post-war periods were times of unusually intense ideational battles revolving around a kind of Gramscian hegemony over the world. Those conflicts did not evolve around civilization and its discontents, but around civilization and its annihilators. Fascism, communism and what was variably called democracy or liberalism locked horns in a pattern far more symmetrical

than was recognized by the latter's adherents in the allegedly free world: all were promoters of non-negotiable principles that sought the status of universal truths, and all became hardened in that battle of the absolutes. It may be a truism that a potent enemy imposes its contours on those who attempt to defend themselves against it. Western political theory, especially its strong American component, had always toyed with a sense of mission: educating, inspiring, directing, converting—indeed to some extent this is still regarded as a central pedagogical responsibility of US political philosophers. While vehemently opposed to the ideas and doctrines emanating from Germany, Russia and to a lesser extent, Italy, they were dazzled by the power and sweep of what Bell called 'the conversion of ideas into social levers'. This is where the action-orientation of ideology suddenly became evident: ideas were clearly seen to have dramatic outcomes in terms of world events, and the sheer efficiency of ideological dissemination, particularly in the case of Nazism, was something of which academic thought-practices could only dream.

The response of creative normative theory was not to produce an antidote, a new scepticism or a genuine pluralism that would undermine the epistemic certainty of total theory, but to construct a weaker totalizing epistemology of its own. Sometimes, as with McCarthyism, totalitarianism was mirrored in practice by its counterpart; more usually, the virtues of liberalism were extolled with the kind of simplicity and passion that had previously assisted in marketing fascist and communist ideas so successfully. Recently, even neo-conservatism has discovered the allure of reducing the Western political heritage to the ostensibly easily exportable duo of 'freedom and democracy'. Although the short-term political benefits of that ideologizing of political theory were notable, its costs were heavy. Liberalism became a mobilizing tool in the hands of Popper, Talmon, Berlin, and others, both through the sketchy generalizations with which its rivals were portrayed, but also in the deep conviction that it offered fixed anchors against human evil. Even the Rawlsian enterprise—a slightly later offshoot of the retreat from relativism—was cast in that mode, of constructing a grand theory founded on an overlapping consensus of such persuasive force that all rational and ethical people could, and would, subscribe to it. It was a message that Western liberals had sounded in the post-war Nuremberg trials—a series of acts that blended political vengeance and moral repugnance, dressed up in the juridical language of a return to an unchallengeable universal ethic.[14] The relentless spatial drive of Nazi Lebensraum and of communist revolution had found their match in liberal universalism—indeed, more than found their match, as it survived them both—while political theorists continued to ignore the legitimate diversity of political thinking in their midst. Now it was not so much truth as reasonableness that became epistemologically irrefutable. And the end of ideology—of that insidious and menacing untouchable—loomed reassuringly large, but only because liberalism was infused with a large dose of otherworldly utopianism that encouraged a vast outbreak of misrecognizing ideology. Utopia had become not a species of ideology but a barrier to its acknowledgement.

The relativism that Mannheim and other theorists had allocated to ideology was almost fatally sidelined. That relativism, based on the assumed objective variance

of social group experiences, mainly but not only those of class, lay dormant for 20 years until a new diversity, based on the assumed subjective malleability of language, perception, and conceptualization, took its place in due course. Mannheim's epistemology eventually matured and permitted later theorists to broach the possibility of choices between reasonable and unreasonable relativisms and between the disparate inputs of diverse points of view, some more valuable than others. That epistemological pluralism came to reject absolutism only through acknowledging that social and political understandings and practices were subject to change over time and space; that even within one socio-cultural sphere legitimate political ends could diverge and compete, and the means to their attainment vary; that class was no longer the key to that variance; yet, nevertheless, that reason, common-sense and, indeed, morality could still disallow many understandings and solutions. The second kind of relativism, inspired by certain extreme versions of postmodernism, permitted—when handled carelessly—the obliteration of most qualitative differentials among understandings and practices, and allowed advocates of moral and philosophical certainties to ridicule the retreat from absolutism as crude nihilism.

Moreover, normative political theorists had no intention of learning from the techniques and political nous of ideologists, and from what actually takes place when political ideas flow through a society. They might have become acquainted with the methods of disseminating such ideas through efficient political organization and means of communication. They might have appreciated how to recast their thinking in a language that could be absorbed by a general, educated population—the very population they needed to convince—and not by like-minded initiates admitted to a private circle isolated by its professional terminology. They might have understood how conceptual configurations could be rejigged through their reordering and re-weighting. They might have found out how to adapt to their benefit existing ideas already in broad circulation by means of such reconfiguration. They might even have taken political emotions seriously, although the 20th century had revealed many to be too hot to handle. They did none of that. Instead, they turned away from the world of politics in a manner that few past political theorists had contemplated, thus condemning most of their efforts to practical sterility and to public invisibility.

From individuals to groups

In the meantime, the study of ideology had to contend with another kind of bias, individualism. Political theory has thrived principally on a form of hero-worship and intellectual cults surrounding gifted individuals, men (and a few women) of genius or of contemporary significance, at the expense of the social and cultural milieux that contributed to shaping them. In the past that reflected a mixture of the narrowness of education and of the hierarchies of power and deference, but by the 19th century that constraint had partially transmogrified into the exaltation of the intellectual entrepreneur, the unconventional eccentric, and the social critic. Until the mid-20th century, the Great Men approach to political thought was

virtually unassailable in universities, fortified in the 20th century by the dominant founding role of two individuals in their respective spheres: Marx and Freud (each of whom, of course, profoundly contributed to the development of theories of ideology). But the immediate consequence was to reinforce the barriers between political theory and the study of ideology. For ideology, as was becoming increasingly clear through Mannheim and others, was a group product. A repositioning needed to occur from examining the intellectual as an individual, to identifying the intelligentsia (not a term that tripped easily off Anglo-American tongues), and from there to exploring ideology more broadly as a communal phenomenon articulated at various levels, feeding decision-making centres and being nourished by them. Some of that had been recognized by Gramsci, but his theory was for a long time unavailable to mainstream political theorists due to the heavy baggage of Marxist assumptions it contained, particularly concerning the hegemony of a unified ideological position underpinned by a social bloc.[15]

The initial inaccessibility of a paradigmatic shift towards groups saw political theorists ensnared in the notion of the individual as producer and creator, snobbishly attracted only to superior thought-products and deeply suspicious of earlier organic theories of state and society that had emphasized the significance of groups. Empirical students of ideology—mainly political scientists who were unsurprisingly banished to the periphery of normative political theory—were themselves willing only to consider amorphous masses or statistical aggregates but not groups as dynamic, power-wielding, and identity-bestowing cultural entities. For most of them, ideologies were records of attitudes that bunched around a given political issue and that could be identified through questionnaires and interviews prior to their quantitative processing by the researcher. Once again, complex theories of ideology were unable to knock on the doors of political theory. When ideology was considered in a non-overtly hostile temper, it was chiefly in a watered-down sense of its Marxist meaning, as a set of beliefs located somewhere loosely between sinister prejudice, common assumptions about society, and sweeping metaphysical solutions to the world's ills.

The more sophisticated study of ideology had to await the renewal of interest of political theory in group phenomena and that was some time in coming. Philosophers had, from the point of view of ideology-research, blazed a false trail with the invention of the spurious liberal-communitarian dichotomy in the 1980s. Communitarianism did not in effect relate to group thinking but to the embeddedness of individuals in particular cultural milieux; nor was it a tool of any subtlety, as it failed to distinguish among multiple types of groups and communities as objects of ideational analysis. To cap all that, the contrast was a false one: liberalism was both a comprehensive political theory and a comprehensive ideology; communitarianism was not an ideology but an aspect of one.[16] As political theory—more specifically, as political philosophy—the two could be artificially constructed as opposites; but the ideology called 'liberalism' had long contained features of sociability and of group dynamics that were 'communitarian'. A decade later, the more promising politics of identity, which did possess the potential to open the door to ideological variability, chose to take

such identity to refer to 'genuine' or 'authentic' sets of values crucial to the flourishing of minority groups, not to disputable self-images. Once again, the study of ideology was the loser, unless it was itself prepared to promote the values it was merely supposed to study and interpret. And that would have removed it from the orbit of the social sciences straight into the realm of prescriptive ethics.

The obscure and the indeterminate

The fourth development—within the ambit of post-modernism and post-Marxism—was abetted by advances in linguistics, literary theory, and philosophy that offered a more sophisticated account of the Marxist dissimulative features of an ideology. The use of ideology in literary analysis, as Michael Moriarty has pointed out, has been and still is largely inspired by Marxist and Althusserian perspectives and their derivatives.[17] But it is also the case that a mixture of two factors brought with it, independently, a new frisson of excitement to the field of ideology-research. The one was a growing appreciation of the unintentional and the unconscious in human thinking. The study of political thinking could hence be an act of decoding meaning, rather than merely one of unmasking and then discarding distortions, as in the Marxist tradition. The unintentional had become not the product of removable oppressive social conditions but of the unavoidable surplus of meaning, in Ricoeur's telling phrase, that speech and writing always generated. To a lesser extent, the unintentional was also the product of the discovery of latent social functions—unknown to participants but crucial to the adequate operation of a society—as formulated in a sequence of sociological argumentation that stretched from Durkheim through Merton.[18] As for the unconscious, here the tortuous path from psychoanalysis through philosophy, language and semantics was mainly a continental phenomenon. Anglo-American political theory was too unbending and, on its own terms, rigorous, to permit such intellectual eclecticism and the sidestepping of cognitive thought. As a result, the recent innovative strands of post-Marxism, in the hands of Lacan and later of Žižek and Laclau, that welded psychoanalysis to notions of semantic social control and distortion in an endeavour to revitalize thinking about ideology, have discovered that those two components doubly disable it from conversing fruitfully with analytical political philosophy.

The other promising factor was the legitimation of indeterminacy. It is difficult to overemphasize the importance of that change. Students of political thought, schooled in precision and attuned to knowability, had to come to terms with living with uncertainty as normal, rather than as a symptom of intellectual and social anomie. That methodological shift paralleled the transformation in understandings of human nature. The sharply outlined purposive agent at the centre of ideologies such as liberalism—and even socialism, in group form—that dominated the 19th century versions of those ideologies and has been preserved by many Anglo-American political philosophers to this day, made way for a somewhat fuzzier and more elusive series of understandings around human vulnerability and fragility.

The recognition of indeterminacy was also closely connected to harnessing the notion of 'essentially contestable concepts' to the objectives of ideology-analysis. Gallie's term was intended to challenge the possibility of an agreed appraisal of the values and norms embraced by political concepts, and to open up questions of definition that had preoccupied some of the logical positivists.[19] As an analytical philosopher, Gallie aimed his argument at others of his philosophical persuasion. For a number of decades Gallie's phrase languished among philosophers while a rather sceptical and low-key debate took place over its significance. In the 1990s, however, ideology-studies resurrected essential contestability as a bridge theory between analytical philosophy and semantics, linking a very British intellectual context with a continental one. The origins of essential contestability were now seen to lie in the structure of concepts, a structure that necessitated the exercise of choice—or at least the expression of unconscious preferences—in assembling the components of a concept and endowing it with meaning. It was consequently contended that competition over the legitimacy of conceptual configurations was the driving force of the struggle among, and even within, ideologies to control political systems. Morphological pluralism, and the endeavours of ideologies to counter it through the decontestation of political terminology and the stipulation of 'correct' meanings, were endorsed as the inevitable architectural features of political language.[20] More recently, the term 'effective contestability' has been introduced to signal not only the logical and structural inevitability of contestability in the abstract, but the lasting contentiousness of concepts under any reasonable set of foreseeable conditions in the real world.[21]

That normalization of indeterminacy also bestowed an enormous amount of freedom on political theorists. They were now confronted with a malleable, fluid set of thought-practices possessing shifting boundaries, unamenable to conventional analysis. Political thought appeared in shapes unrecognizable in the light of the supposed textual and semantic rigidities with which they had been trained to work.[22] Some took up that challenge. Their work began to demonstrate that indeterminacy does not lead to the abandoning of our quest for knowledge but to a readiness to revisit our understandings and to accept the constant mutation of viewpoints. They also became aware of political language as a tool through which human agency was considerably enhanced—both the agency of the participant and the agency of the imaginative interpreter. But others, alarmed or uninterested, endorsed the retreat into the safety of modelling utopian worlds, or persevered in conducting philosophical laboratory experiments, or reassumed the mantle of ethicists (though, really, of ideologists) in fighting the good fight over whatever domestic or international issue pressed on their conscience, in order to re-establish some of the moral certainties that were beginning to evade the grasp even of Western religions.

Alongside all those trials and tribulations endured by the phenomenon of ideology and its analysis, the study of ideology emerged, if at all, as a separate intellectual activity. Marx, Mannheim, Gramsci, Althusser, Geertz and others had contributed to that general awareness of something happening with regard to broader ideational issues. But it was something epistemological, something

sociological, something anthropological, something institutional, not something at the heart of political investigation. The talk surrounding ideology was of classes, mass movements, oppressive power, the intelligentsia, state apparatuses, relativism and objectivity, functions, and maps. True, those themes comprised important political phenomena, but the recognition of the *direct* and continuous relationship between ideology and ordinary political life was lacking. Granted even that many political theorists were moderately interested in them, those matters were certainly not their bread and butter.

Nevertheless, a slow but steady percolation of external perspectives back into political theory was eventually set in motion. The multi-layered reading of texts and utterances became increasingly seductive. A power component, now not necessarily attached to exploitation, was hitched on to the comprehension of political language. Identifying the structure of political argument proffered new insights into the constraints and parameters of political debate; after all, theorists could only benefit from familiarity with the properties of their raw material. And the interconnectedness of language spilled over into recognizing the interconnectedness of political concepts, with the prospect of multiple and pliable holisms. That of course dovetailed neatly into the focus on human interaction and social entities that the study of politics involves.

Political thought *as* ideology

And so, from the viewpoint of political theory, a fifth stage has commenced: an assault on the bastions of political theory that aims at installing ideology at its centre—by no means as the sole occupant of the domain of political theory, but as equal partner with political philosophy and the historical articulation of political ideas. Those bastions are well-defended by scholars, themselves subject to an understandable mixture of reason and emotion that typifies us all as political actors-cum-thinkers, and surreptitiously even as researchers. The fundamental challenge now facing political theory is to further open up its boundaries to the external influences provided through the fourth development, while retaining its focus on the political. That is being accomplished by navigating among a number of recent genres of analysis, neither affiliating with one alone nor simply synthesizing them, but constructing a position out of the most salient features of ideologies as social and conceptual phenomena and then reinforcing it by recourse to supporting insights from adjacent fields of research. In addition this requires an assessment of the detailed role that the investigation of ideologies can occupy not only in its own right, but in bolstering the conventional purposes of political theory.

What is different, then, and what do the concept of ideology and its study now indicate within the domain of political theory?

1. Perhaps the most radical claim of these changing perspectives is the ubiquity as well as the inevitability of ideology, but bereft of the automatic exploitative or dissimulative charges levelled against it. It is simply the assertion that all expressions of political thought, irrespective of the various readings to which they

may be subject, also adopt the form of ideologies. Whatever magic we may later weave with political theory or political philosophy, imaginative and critical, we access such theory or philosophy via patterned and situated combinations of political concepts that temporarily define our understanding of the political and that compete with alternative configurations over political support and over the central control of the political. The ideological is only one dimension of a text or utterance, but it is always there, and always of interest. Whether it is of overriding interest will depend partly on the context and partly on the methodological base from which we embark. And ideologies may indeed be distorting and harmful, but they do not have to be so by definition. Rather, they are human and social products that bind together views of the world—in the most general sense, à la Mannheim, a political Weltanschauung—and enable collective action in furthering or impeding the goals of a society. Nor are ideologies necessarily superimposed by oppressive ruling groups on unwilling societies, as the view of ideology as manipulative and dissimulative would have it. A minority of ideologies may follow that pattern, but on the whole they are outgrowths of understandings and perceptions that permeate societies and that emanate from them, albeit often in a mutually competitive mode and usually articulated and refined by intellectual and political elites.

2. Political philosophy and the history of political thought are themselves organized, more often unwittingly then not, into categories that invite ideological analysis. Rawlsian political liberalism is undoubtedly a reflection of American ideological conceptions of the constitution as facilitator of a common, yet neutral, good that is within reach of a diverse society. Theories of political obligation resonate with the primacy of human agency and the virtues of voluntarism that non-Western ideologies might find disturbing, and with notions of contract that evoke market relationships. Arguments for the inviolability of human dignity are presented as axiomatic assumptions concerning human equality and a fundamental notion of moral identity that transcends any empirical evidence to the contrary. That is not to argue that many, possibly most of these aims, are noble and attractive ones. But as political theorists our task is not only to preach nobility; it is also to register, understand, interpret and explain the 'hard-wiring' within a particular set of political beliefs, and to do so in the pursuit of knowledge as well as for instrumental reasons.

As for the history of political thought, its categories have themselves been formative of ideological families. The by now antiquated 'perennial questions' approach appeared to identify eternal issues such as liberty, justice and (dis)obedience, around which politics was said to revolve and whose development could be tracked over time. The 'great men' or 'great books' approach celebrated political thought as the product of elites but also as the construction of holistic and comprehensive systems of thought that principally contrived to offer answers to time-specific issues in universal language. Hence the later, narrow construal of ideologies was merely as a mirror-image distortion, effected by scheming ideologues, of the portentous aspirations and elevating mission of political thought itself. Only with the recent rise of a more nuanced contextualism has the scholarly aggrandizement of individual political thought given way to an exploration of its

social location, its variations, its dependence on the features of language, as well as its frequent mundanity, thus beginning to coalesce with newly emerging understandings of ideology.

3. Another shift in the current analysis of ideology is evident in the dual use of ideology and ideologies. While Birnbaum rightly noted that the dominant *empirical* approach 'entails the analysis not of ideology but of ideologies',[23] it is only with the development of cluster and morphological approaches to ideology that the *theory* of ideology has begun to catch up. The almost exclusive convention of referring to ideology in the singular served for a long while to blind political theorists to its diverse forms, its metamorphoses, and its structural richness as attested by the manifold and subtle variations of which political concepts are capable. Multiplicity, differentiation, pluralism, flexibility—these normal features of political concepts chime in also with the world of values most Western researchers inhabit. They enable us both to appreciate how choices among values occur in a world of contestable concepts and to learn how to initiate such choices ourselves with some understanding of the consequences of particular idea-combinations: the outcomes, costs, benefits, limits and opportunities that the raw material of political thinking generates.

It is therefore no accident that liberal epistemology has established a mutually sustaining relationship with the presumption of ideological diversity, while the epistemic monism of Marxism and its offshoots have engendered a notion of ideology as undifferentiated.[24] But the 'is', the 'can' and the 'might' clearly precede, and lay the foundations of, the 'ought' in this scheme of things. The study of ideology becomes the study of the nature of political thought: its building blocks and the clusters of meaning with which it shapes the political worlds we populate. And one thing that political philosophers might be encouraged to do following some acquaintance with the analysis of ideologies is to relax (as distinct from demolish) the universalism that accompanies many of their prescriptions and to endorse the possibility of multiple, and perhaps mutating, solutions to the question of what makes a good society.

4. The study of ideologies is unquestionably the study of substantive, concrete configurations of political ideas that matter to, and in, societies. That will present problems for many political philosophers. Even if we jettison the idea of ideologies as false and manipulative, and their study becomes no longer a question of confronting the inferior and the wrong, the ethicists among philosophers will find the inclusion of the ordinary as the focus of study difficult to digest, let alone implement. The upgrading of the commonplace and average runs against philosophical intuitions about the uniqueness, difficulty and high standards involved in establishing ethical theories and guidelines. Even Marxism, when purporting to focus on the so-called ordinary—the proletariat—rejected the thinking emanating from that class as insignificant, due to the distorting nature of alienation.

However, investigating the trivial and the insignificant alongside the consequential has now been infused with a methodological freshness that opens up new avenues of analysis and reveals previously hidden social and ideational

information. To enquire of political theory what it is and does is the kind of introspection that quite a few philosophers, particularly Anglo-American ones, shun. That is surprising in view of the highly reflective nature of their occupation. But it is nonetheless essential to the study of politics and political thought—and to our calling as students of society, *Sozialwissenschaftler*—that we engage in this critical inspection. That is, I believe, where the study of ideology and ideologies is now leading us: the laying bare of the thought-processes and thought-practices that societies exhibit.

Students of ideology join hands with historians in expressing interest in the evolution and decay of idea-clusters, particularly with the recent generation of conceptual historians, who are sensitive to conceptual diversity and mutation, and among whom Reinhart Koselleck is the most conspicuous member.[25] For those analysts of ideology who highlight the morphological relations within an ideological structure such change over time is highly instructive, as it casts light on actual conceptual combinations, and on the reasons for the attainment by some of them of temporal longevity and for the failure of others. It also points out the cultural and intellectual possibilities and constraints that operate on ideological architecture, as well as the political causes and consequences of such combinations. In that sense spatial conceptual relationships attract as much interest as do temporal ones. And as noted earlier, students of ideology also join hands with semanticists, poststructuralists and scholars of mass culture in an appreciation of the unconscious and unintended conceptual arrangements side by side with the conscious ones.

The awareness of ideological pliability is related to the internal structure of ideologies (and for that matter political philosophies as well). The nature of those concepts whose interlinkages form ideologies is to contain both long-standing and short-term elements—cores on the one hand, and adjacent and peripheral components on the other. Ideologies replicate that structure in a more complex way. When perceived as a cluster, our attention shifts immediately to the *relationships* among the concepts that mark out an ideology. Those relationships alter along a rigidity–plasticity continuum. The two polar attributes are vital indicators of the kind of political theory we are confronting. They reflect the implicit methodology behind the thought-product—dogmatic or flexible, confident or tentative, absolute or relative, universal or time- and space-sensitive? Our attention also shifts towards *boundary* problems: which domain constitutes an ideology? Are boundaries themselves an attempt to impose rigidity on a semantic field, hence misleading because they should be porous or even non-existent? On the other hand, does the human need for Gestalt not necessitate the superimposition of boundaries as a means to understanding and—politically crucial—to acting within a framework of institutions and processes?

Thus, for example, an ideological tradition such as liberalism emerges in a new light. Its study and reconstruction was once almost entirely the domain of historians of political thought, whose main objective was to trace the evolution of a progressive and potentially universalizing and unified theory deducible from first principles or from human nature. More recently, it has been appropriated by

political philosophers who have endeavoured to model it as identical, no less, to a universal social ethics. True, liberalism has been known as an ideology that has more or less successfully withstood intellectual attacks from socialists, political rivalry from conservatives, and out-and-out war from the totalitarianisms of the 20th century. But when we switch focus to the micro-structure of liberalism, to the internal morphology of what is generally thought to be liberal ideology, things begin to change and liberalism's potential for perfection becomes elusive. Significantly, that change of perspective, that attention to detail, fits in with the rigour demanded by philosophers but also with the empiricism required by political scientists. The study of liberalism becomes that of concrete sets of ideas and beliefs, concatenations that are then constructed by political and intellectual processes so as to display the soubriquet 'liberal' at a particular point in space and time, even as they can be mapped out more broadly as overlapping liberalisms, possessing relatively stable centres but rapidly mutating peripheries.

That itself is a valuable education in the nature of political thought, so that close acquaintance with ideologies is not only knowledge of a major political phenomenon but a step towards comprehending what the social product we call 'political thought' *is*, not only what it *does* or *can do* (let alone ought to do). At the same time, as Bo Stråth has rightly reminded us, the master-narrative traditions of ideologies—though under attack—still act as constraints on infinite pliability.[26] Those traditions are powerful, if not always completely successful, curbs on the ideological fragmentation that we have been witnessing as the 21st century unfolds. They also serve to illustrate that what is perceived as one kind of ideological construct by the general public may not turn out to be as clear-cut when put under the scholar's magnifying glass. Both students of ideology and historians therefore exercise their discretion in uncovering new patterns through which to view and interpret historical sequences: one scholar's 'socialism' may be regarded by others as social democracy, communism, welfarism, or totalitarianism.

Post-structuralists, many of whom have come to the subject of ideology from the breeding grounds of discourse as power on the one hand, and the weaving of reality-screening social imaginaries on the other, are intriguingly suspended between interpretative and normative critique. That does raise an issue of some gravity, especially because on that count they signal their loyalty to the hallowed tradition of ethical evaluation, so central to political theory. It also highlights again the difference between doing theory and analysing theory—with philosophers frequently claiming to occupy the former category and ideological morphologists and 'conceptualists' the latter. Each, however, trespasses in varying degrees on the domain of the other, thus throwing up new challenges for students of political thought.

5. Finally, but not least importantly, the study of ideology offers a route towards a reconnection of political thought with political science: a much-needed reconciliation of political theory with a focus on political processes and structures. It is not only that ideologies are competitions over the public control of political ideas, though that alone would classify them as quintessential political phenomena

and move ideas to centre-stage of the political. For whoever controls political thought exerts considerable influence on political action, an argument as evident in Plato as it is in Orwell, and as implicit in Mill as it is in Shaw. It is also the case that ideologies actually exist as salient political entities—as Durkheimian 'social facts'—and that the social sciences are fittingly fascinated by the actual, even more than by the potential.

A generation ago Lewis S. Feuer could still write of ideology that 'the chief characteristic of the scientific use is that it preserves the distinction between science and ideology; the chief trait of the ideological use of 'ideology' is that it tends to obliterate this distinction, and to regard every set of ideas as an ideology'. For Feuer, the scientific study of ideology focused on the evaluation of ideologies in term of their truth, while the ideological study of ideology promoted an unwelcome augmentation: 'to each generation and class its ideology; everyman his own ideologist'.[27] Many students of ideology now tend to think precisely the opposite. The evaluation of truth (not to be confused with facts) is the preserve of ethicists, moralists and religious preachers, while an awareness of the ubiquity and pervasiveness of ideology relocates its study to the scholarly areas of observation, analysis and interpretation—by any reasonable account a 'scientific' or rather '*Wissenschaftliche'* activity, to which ethical evaluation can and indeed, should, subsequently be attached by others. Ideologies are general and deep-rooted features of politics, and we cannot as social scientists weed out all but the nice ones. Nor, to reiterate, is that by any means a claim that everything is reducible to ideology, but rather that all political phenomena have an ideological dimension, whether prominent or faint.

From here to another linkage between political science and the study of ideologies. Among political scientists, ideologies have been closely associated with political parties, often assumed to be the originators, not only the carriers and distributors, of an ideology. Ideologies are indeed importantly linked to parties, but not quite in the ways thought typical in the past, when parties were by and large seen as progenitors of ideologies, and an uncontroversial left–right spectrum was the most obvious graphic representation of ideological differentiation. For sure, a political party may give publicity and weight to a particular variant of an ideological family and it may even contribute significantly towards changing and renewing some of an ideology's features, as Paolo Pombeni has observed.[28] But an ideology contained, so to speak, within a party structure will be trimmed to fit within the institutional framework. It will be simplified, made user-friendly, harmonized internally, energized assertively, and overblown. The suggestion of a continuum from left to right—invented by politicians at the time of the French revolution but widely adopted by social scientists—reduces ideological differences to a homogeneous scalar sequence applied to all the features of a given ideology. That means that it must be unequivocally to the left or the right of another, when instead its diverse components form multiple spatial relationships with the components of rival ideologies. In sum, some of the doubts about ideologies arise from their use and misuse by parties, from the superficiality with which they decontest the political meanings with which they are entrusted, or which they

appropriate. Empirical scholars have frequently been lured to the site of a political party when attempting to glean evidence about an ideology. But what they encounter is only the tip of the iceberg of a larger and more amorphous ideational entity, and it is here that political theorists who specialize in studying ideologies may have something to contribute. Specifically, they need to persuade political scientists that the study of politics must include the meticulous investigation of the political ideas available to a society, and their intricate interrelationships. The more sophisticated theories of ideology now enable scholars to re-examine the fragmented and coalescent nature of political parties themselves.[29]

Identifying ideologies in the world of politics

The question of the ubiquity of ideology within the realm of politics, however oscillating it may prove to be, brings with it the following considerations. First, by politics we understand any human interaction that involves power transactions, the ranking and distribution of significant goods, the mobilization of support, the organization of stability as well as instability, and decision-making for collectivities that includes the construction of—or resistance to—political plans and visions. Second, such views of the world have a fluid morphology that may be grouped together in broad family resemblances, but is concurrently in constant flux over space and time. Third, while the particulars of any such view are elective, the existence of ideology is inevitable. We can only access the political world through decontesting the contested conceptual arrangements that enable us to make sense of that world, and we do so—deliberately or unconsciously—by imposing specific meanings onto the indeterminate range of meanings that our conceptual clusters can hold.

That is the essence of the ideological act, or thought-practice, and it is performed equally by regular actors in a political system, by professional politicians, and by ethico-political philosophers—in short, by all who endeavour to fashion or react to the political world around them by developing languages of public participation rather than of investigation.[30] They all begin their cogitations against the background of an already existing political vocabulary, and they all attempt (even if they ultimately fail) to impose specific senses on repositories of political meaning that are by their semantic nature multivalent and contestable. But inasmuch as an ideology is a complex set of decisions as to *which* meanings to allocate to the concepts through which we interact with the world, ideologies are themselves necessarily political, because decisions are a distinguishing feature of the political act. So ideologies are the thought-products par excellence of the political sphere: they are necessary, normal, and they facilitate (and reflect) political action.

Crucially, ideologies may come in all shapes and sizes: bombastic, totalizing, doctrinaire; or modest, fragmented, and loose. They may emerge in central political and state institutions, or attempt to regulate the admissions policy of a university, or underpin the argumentative logic of agency-based political theories; and they may site themselves within the best and the worst of families. They may

be ethically benign, or injurious to human well-being. They also permit political theorists to indulge in a largely atypical activity: to factor emotions into their understanding of political language, not as a side-constraint or regrettable lapse from the strictures of logic and rational debate, but as exhibited in the rhetoric, passion or intensity that are incorporated—albeit in varying dosages—into all political language and that serve as major conveyors and enhancers of the messages that political concepts carry. Historians have already come to terms with the importance of rhetoric and they have made impressive headway into analysing theories of emotions.[31] Only a small number, however, have investigated the historical role of emotions as such.[32] Political theorists have recently focused on specific, mainly negative, emotions such as fear and anger, but need to examine further the general role of emotions as conveyers of political power.

In sum, ideologies are imaginative maps drawing together facts that themselves may be disputed. They are collectively produced and collectively consumed, though the latter happens in unpredictable ways, and that collective nature makes them public property. Without them we collide with the social practices which we confront, though not infrequently the unavoidable selectivity of ideologies acts as blinkers that are themselves the cause of our injuries. For political theorists the peculiarities of ideologies lie in the details of those curious, pliable, four-dimensional maps and in how they form, hone, promote and demolish the ideas, conceptualizations and group-affections at our disposal.

An awareness of the above should encourage political theorists to adopt a more generous view both of their subject-matter and of their own role. Thus, political thought is not only embedded in texts and speech but in behaviour, routines and practices; and the political thinking discernible through the latter may often be closer to the pulse of a society. Three examples from different habitats of political thinking will suffice. (a) Stop-and-search police practices that single out non-whites in predominantly white societies reflect assumptions about the relationship between skin colour and the propensity to commit a crime. Indeed, that effectively constitutes a political *theory*, however unsuspectingly articulated, with a banal and unproven correlation at its midst. (b) University selection according to academic ability may seem to be too obvious and sensible a criterion to question. It is nevertheless a ranking of significance in which intellectual prowess attracts major social prizes, while any possible genetic origins of intelligence and application, however partial and tenuous, that may distort the fairness of such ranking, are discounted for liberal egalitarian reasons. That academic work then fails to attract high financial rewards reflects on the utilitarian and market-oriented preferences of the politicians and employers who forge the public policies of modern states: productive intelligence trumps other kinds. (c) The predilection of analytical political philosophers for elevating autonomy as a super value is uncontentious from within a framework that defines the most important feature of being human as possessing purposive, rational agency. That thinking operates on two discrete levels. It is the construction of a political theory-cum-philosophy designed to adapt institutions and practices to attaining supreme human goods and to realizing universal virtues, in particular those that enshrine human liberty and the capacity for

the critical assessment of the self and others. Yet it also embodies conventional Western beliefs about the uniqueness of the individual and the desirability of effective individual insulation from many forms of external influence. The fact that many of those practices and beliefs are held by large groups and learned through time-honoured socialization processes adds a veneer of irony to the conventional scholarly insistence on the uniqueness and individual provenance of political thought.

Then there is the whole question of the non-verbal transmission of ideologies—in song and music, in pictures, in art, in advertising. These have been located in the domain of cultural studies, as illustrated by Roger Griffin,[33] and have yet to link up properly with political theory as a further source of evidence for political thinking and for the attitudes that constrain that thinking. The problem here is obvious: as political theorists we have received training in analysing and interpreting words and texts—Derrida's logocentrism—but not images. Yet politics—and ideology—occur importantly through sight and non-verbal sound: marches, riots, anthems, uniforms, flags, sirens, the architecture of public institutions, standing when a dignitary enters the room, cartoons, the facial expressions of immigration officers, the structure and seating arrangements of negotiating tables, cheering a national sports team, to give a few random instances. Most of those messages are complex, some are subliminal, and many substitute for verbal expression—increasingly so in modern societies where the rapid dissemination of ideas through emotional visual symbols has been discovered to be extremely effective, more so than rational argument.

To sum up: the rehabilitation of ideology both as social phenomenon and as analytical tool has shifted it from just a class or mass occurrence to a general feature of political thinking. It has removed it from the marginalized and ethically suspect shadowlands of its past existence and enabled it to claim recognition as the archetype of political thinking, in its mobilizing, deciding and selecting roles. Its study rides on the crest of ideational variability, but less so in the shape of the temporal and spatial particularisms of rigid social relativism and rather more in the form of built-in conceptual indeterminacy. That in turn generates the contestability that is the quintessential fact of political language and political action. The very indeterminacy that relegated ideology to the sidelines of political theory has come back in triumphant mode to vindicate and enhance the status of ideology—not as a defect in argument, not as the absence of attainable rational and ethical consensus, not as the papering over of a psychoanalytical or articulatory lack, but as political thinking pure and simple. For once we acknowledge politics as a permanent site of both reasonable and unreasonable disagreements, we alight on what ideologies have reflected, amplified, and attempted to manage, now and always.

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