



REASSESSING POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES

THE DURABILITY OF DISSENT

EDITED BY **MICHAEL FREEDEN**



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London and New York

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Reassessing Political Ideologies

‘A volume of first class essays by top class contributors, all of whom are acknowledged experts in their field.’ *Jeremy Jennings, University of Birmingham*

‘The editor opens and closes the volume with conceptual and methodological considerations, and each essay in between offers an insightful and readable reassessment of a particular ideology. This book is “must” reading for any student of the subject.’ *Terence Ball, Arizona State University*

‘It is often said that we live in a post-ideological age. This important new collection of essays by leading scholars dispels that notion by revealing the subtlety, vitality and complexity of ideological argument in contemporary political thought.’ *Andrew Gamble, University of Sheffield*

Reassessing Political Ideologies brings together expert analyses of the development – and current state – of the major political ideologies of the twentieth century. Ideologies, despite recent political upheavals and crucial transformations throughout the past century, are still very much with us. This book offers both a framework for understanding the nature of ideology today and a re-evaluation of the dominant Western political belief systems, with particular regard to their evolution and the differences between them.

The following ideologies are discussed: liberalism, Marxism and post-Marxism, socialism, conservatism, Christian democracy, fascism, the radical right, nationalism, feminism and green political thought. The introductory and concluding chapters by Michael Freeden offer new tools for understanding ideologies that take account of recent ideological fragmentation and recombination, and advance the micro-analysis of ideologies. These studies reveal significant changes in both the presentation of ideologies and their substance.

The renowned specialist political theorists and historians, who engage with ideologies from a number of methodological perspectives, demonstrate to sceptics that ideologies are an ineliminable dimension in thinking about politics. Through their combination of continuity and malleability, ideologies remain central resources for political systems.

Michael Freeden is Professor of Politics at the University of Oxford and Professorial Fellow, Mansfield College, Oxford. He is the author of a number of books including *The New Liberalism*, *Liberalism Divided*, *Rights*, and *Ideologies and Political Theory*. He is the founding editor of the *Journal of Political Ideologies*, published by Taylor & Francis Ltd under the Routledge imprint.

Contributors

Terrell Carver is Professor of Political Theory at the University of Bristol. He has degrees from Columbia University and the University of Oxford, and has published widely on Marx and Engels. His most recent book is *The Postmodern Marx* (Manchester University Press, 1998), and he has also done the new translations of *Marx's Later Political Writings* (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

Diana Coole is Professor of Political Theory and head of department at Queen Mary and Westfield College, University of London. She is the author of *Women in Political Theory*, Harvester-Wheatsheaf, second edition 1993, and *Negativity and Politics*, Routledge, 2000. She is currently writing a book for Routledge on Merleau-Ponty and the Political.

Robert Eccleshall is Professor of Politics at the School of Politics of the Queen's University of Belfast, and Head of the School. He is the author of *English Conservatism Since the Restoration* (1990) and the co-author of *Political Ideologies* (second edition, 1994; third edition, forthcoming). He is also co-editor of *Western Political Thought: A Bibliographical Guide to Post-War Research* (1995), *Biographical Dictionary of British Prime Ministers* (1998) and *Political Discourse in Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Ireland* (2001).

Michael Freedon is Professor of Politics at Oxford University and Professorial Fellow of Mansfield College, Oxford. Among his books are *The New Liberalism: An Ideology of Social Reform*, Clarendon Press, 1978; *Liberalism Divided: A Study in British Political Thought 1914–1939*, Clarendon Press, 1986; *Reappraising J.A. Hobson* (ed.), Unwin Hyman, 1990; *Rights*, Open University Press, 1991; *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach*, Clarendon Press, 1996. He is the founder-editor of the *Journal of Political Ideologies*.

Gerald F. Gaus is Professor of Philosophy and Political Science at Tulane University, New Orleans. He has been Research Fellow at the Australian National University and Visiting Scholar at the Social Philosophy and Policy Center, Bowling Green State University. He is the author of *The Modern Liberal Theory of Man* (1983), *Value and Justification* (1990), *Justificatory Liberalism* (1996), *Social Philosophy* (1999) and *Political Theories and Political Concepts* (2000). He is co-editor of *Public and Private in Social Life* (1983) and *Public Reason* (1998), and of Bernard Bosanquet's *The Philosophical Theory of the State and Related Essays* (2000). Professor Gaus is an editor of the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*.

Roger Griffin is Professor of History of Ideas at Oxford Brookes University. He is the author of *The Nature of Fascism* (1991, 1993), and editor of *Fascism* (1995) and *International Fascism: Theories, Causes, and the New Consensus* (1998). In addition he has published widely articles and chapters on comparative aspects of interwar fascism as well as neo-fascism and new forms of the radical right, nationalism, racism, modernity and globalization. He is at present working on a major study of the relationship between modernity, modernism and fascism.

James Meadowcroft is a Reader in the Department of Politics at the University of Sheffield. His research interests are focused on political ideologies and environmental politics. His publications include *Conceptualizing the State: Innovation and Dispute in British Political Thought 1880–1914*, Oxford University Press, 1995; *Democracy and the Environment* (ed., with William Lafferty), Edward Elgar, 1997 and *Planning Sustainability* (ed., with Michael Kenny), Routledge, 1999.

Paolo Pombeni is Professor of European History at the Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Bologna. Editor of the journal *Ricerche di Storia Politica*. Main works: *Demagogia e tirannide. Uno studio sulla forma partito del fascismo*, Il Mulino, 1984; *Partiti e sistemi politici nella storia contemporanea*, Il Mulino, 1994, third revised edition; French translation, PUF, 1992; *Autorità sociale e potere politico nell'Italia contemporanea*, Marsilio, 1993; *Lo stato e la politica*, Il Mulino, 1997. At present he is completing a volume about *The Democracy of Affluence. Politics in Europe 1945–1969* and has started a new study: *The People and Its Leaders. The Backbone of Western Constitutionalism*.

Donald Sassoon is Professor of Comparative European History at Queen Mary and Westfield College, University of London. He is the author of numerous books, essays and articles on twentieth-century European history and politics (especially Italy). His *One Hundred Years of Socialism*, Fontana, won the Deutscher Prize 1997 and is being translated in several languages. He is completing a book on the construction of the popularity of Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* and has embarked on a history of cultural markets in Europe since 1800.

Zeev Sternhell is an historian of ideas working on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He holds the Léon Blum chair of Political Science at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He is the author, among works in several languages, of *Neither Right nor Left: Fascist Ideology in France* (1986); *The Birth of Fascist Ideology: From Cultural Rebellion to Political Revolution* (1994) and most recently, *The Founding Myths of Israel: Nationalism, Socialism and the Making of the Jewish State* (1997). The three books have been published by Princeton University Press.

Andrew Vincent is Professor of Political Theory, University of Sheffield (formerly Professor of Political Theory, University of Cardiff), life member of the Collingwood Society, and Senior Fellow in Humanities, Research Center, Australian National University. He is author of *Modern Political Ideologies* (1992 and second edition 1995); and co-author of *A Radical Hegelian: The Social and Political Philosophy of Henry Jones* (1993) and most recently *British Idealism and Political Theory* (2000). He is also co-editor of *G.W.F. Hegel's Philosophical Propaedeutic* (1986), and *Political Theory: Tradition and Diversity* (1997).

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1 Political ideologies in substance and method

Appraising a transformation

Michael Freeden

Developments and disputes

The advent of a new millennium has been a good excuse for much taking of stock, and this volume takes advantage of that opportunity to direct a retrospective, and a tentatively prospective, eye at some of the major ideological currents of the past century, and to assess them in line with current scholarly understandings. In this introduction I have not followed the conventional practice of commenting on the subsequent chapters. That commentary is proffered at the end of the book, in the form of several second-order thoughts. Readers may quite properly prefer to permit the various contributors to speak first for themselves, savouring their multifarious and reflective arguments to which no commentary can do justice. The basic approach shared by all of the contributors is to locate ideologies at the heart of the political process, constituting as they do a mainstay of the art of politics, and to recognize that their colossal impact on the course of past and present events requires their detailed analysis from a viewpoint that is fundamentally sympathetic rather than hostile to their natures and roles. As vehicles of dissent ideologies are an indispensable resource for the intelligent conducting and re-inventing of politics in its variegated forms. As families of political thought displaying clear consensual patterns and continuities, ideologies are a vital and energizing ingredient in the fashioning of group identities and policies. In both these forms they are scarcely a flash in the pan but a durable and ineliminable facet of social life, at once creative and consolidating.

Some years ago, Karl Dietrich Bracher wrote a book about twentieth-century political thought entitled *The Age of Ideologies*.¹ That title summons up a couple of diverse questions: to what extent has that been the case and, alternatively, can we now imagine an age without ideologies? Bracher had a particular conception of ideologies in mind: grandiose, abstract and threatening. Undoubtedly, the century has experienced clashes of such titans, with the emergence of mass politics and sophisticated modes of recruiting popular support and activism. Undoubtedly, it has also seen the rapid rise and fall of an ideology such as fascism and a rather more protracted process with regard to communism, though to proclaim their death would still be premature. It has been fascinated by the power of totalitarian ideologies, sweeping all impediments and opposition in

their paths like an avalanche. But these very ideologies have provoked enormous resistance and abhorrence. Those reactions have created in the Western world a coalition of convenience with Marxist critics of ideology – a coalition eager to assume a world immune to, and transcending, the noxious distortions of ideology. But take away the menace of ideology, both as practice and as word, and you no longer require the protection, either. If ideologies are normal and extensive forms of thought rather than aberrations, and if they occur in more modest – though by no means less influential – forms, we might as well begin to search for some of the benefits they bestow on their host societies. We need to take them seriously; we may even have to treat them with respect.

So where do we stand in the new century? That question needs to run on two parallel, though interrelated, axes: what is the state of concrete ideologies, and what is the state of the study of ideologies? Twice, in the mid-twentieth century and towards its end, we have been informed that the age of ideologies is over. Twice this has proved to be incorrect. But here the students of ideology have been at fault, for failing to identify as ideologies certain phenomena placed right under their eyes, and for mistaking ideological convergence for ideological invisibility, while concurrently predicting with confidence the end of radical ideational dissent. However, the end of ideology would be – to put it simply – no less than the end of politics, a cause to which Saint-Simon and Engels were deeply committed, and to which some contemporary philosophical liberals seem curiously attracted. Yet we may dismiss that option and still argue that politics has changed significantly over the century, and that such change is reflected in its symbiotic relationship with ideology. Conversely, we cannot ignore the truism that, although the forms of structuring, presenting and disseminating ideologies may have varied over time, some of those variations do not reflect an altered reality. They are rather a function of different questions, and novel perspectives, focused on by students of ideologies.

Looking back, what can we say of twentieth-century ideologies? Did they creep up on us, from their misty and sometimes mystical eighteenth- and nineteenth-century origins in central Europe, all those populist, even vulgar, socialisms, fascisms and religious conservatisms, to be met by a proud English (and later American) liberalism, whose banner was held high by the wise guardians of a moderate civilization? Were those older ideological families further adopted by third-world movements, whose added local flavour transformed them into tools both of modernization and of oppression? Were all these ructions the temporary price of introducing ‘the people’ into positions of power and authority, of the gradual percolation of democracy from centre to periphery inside each society and across the globe? Certainly, there have been vocal advocates for all these views, but those narratives are culpable in their simplifications and misconceptions.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the major ideologies – conservatism, liberalism and socialism – were all at a point of transformation. Conservatism was adapting, with considerable success, to the rise of powerful forces to its left, while at the same time it was collecting the disaffected from among the liberal

camp and reaching beyond its traditional class and religious bases. Liberalism and socialism were experiencing dramatic growth, but of different kinds. As a political movement, liberalism was under pressure; while as an ideology it was innovative and dynamic, unearthing its communal principles and embarking upon the project of reformulating utilitarianism that culminated in the welfare state. Socialism, to the contrary, was fast expanding as a political movement, but was beset from its infancy with centrifugal tendencies and ideological factionalism – Marxist, evolutionary, syndicalist, as well as contention within each of these categories – which weakened its effectiveness and attraction. Nevertheless, it was an era that witnessed strong public competition of these ideological groupings over the formation of public policy, and in which political argument and debate were markedly salient; indeed, comprising a significant part of the intellectual pursuits of the educated and the socially aware. It is no accident that the prestigious Home University Library commissioned three books, published in 1911–12, titled *Liberalism*, *Conservatism*, and *The Socialist Movement* – the first penned by L.T. Hobhouse becoming a highly influential twentieth-century classic, while the last illustrated the amalgamation of theory and practice, typical of ideological thinking,² through the person of its author, J. Ramsay MacDonald, Britain's first Labour prime minister. The preferred words to describe those sets of ideas may have been doctrines, programmes or simply ideas but, at least on the progressive side of the spectrum, few might have objected to their designation as ideologies, had that term in its non-Marxist sense been in common circulation.

The interwar years saw the advent of the totalitarianisms of left and right, a ferocious new political weapon as yet unknown on such a scale, in which rigid and binding dogmas, promulgated by authoritarian dictatorships, were employed as mobilizing instruments not only to coerce but to enthuse mass publics to conduct unbecoming of people in full command of their rational and moral properties. Their political opponents were quick to excoriate these phenomena as ideologies *qua* manipulative and pervasive ideas, purveyors of cataclysmic change, more powerful and efficient than guns or tanks, that overruled the natural divergence of human thought. In their anxiety to curb this epidemic of thought-control, its detractors confused the power of superimposed idea-systems with the necessary production of political ideas as a communal resource, and even resisted the efforts made by reforming democratic states to ally themselves to alternative visions of collectively beneficial futures. Ideologies were firmly put beyond the pale of acceptable politics.

But of course ideologies had been there all the time, and not just in abstract and systemic garb. Karl Mannheim had taken an important step in that direction when he identified ideologies as systems that endorsed the *status quo*, in the face of *status quo* defenders who objected to the labelling of what they alleged was a pragmatic and *ad hoc* approach as an ideology.³ In so doing, Mannheim had adapted the Marxist understanding of ideology as reflecting the social and class bases of particular groups, and had designated all such known constructs as ideologies. However, Mannheim continued to endorse the Marxian-Engelsian notion of ideology as falsehood, deliberate or not, in his category of the partial

concept of ideology. He accompanied that with a total concept that was akin to a *Weltanschauung*, but which suffered from the stigma of relativism – a label which certain philosophical purists have habitually used to denigrate contextual analysis. In his haste to escape the relativist constrictions of ideology, Mannheim endowed intellectuals with the supra-social capacity to transcend its group-perspectives, thus perpetuating the Marxist relegation of ideologies to temporal ephemerality, to rational inferiority, and to interest-serving group-egoism.

Mannheim nevertheless left the road to overcoming ideologies open, but already their presentation to the world of social understanding was of a peculiar kind. Ideologies continued to be seen as dissimulations, at worst patently false and at best the indispensable accoutrement of political ambition in the shape of a non-binding rhetoric, increasingly necessary to pick up new voters as fast as the political system could endow them with full citizenship. Ideologies were also assumed to be block edifices, massive and encompassing in their range, markedly monolithic in their internal structure (with the above-noted exception of socialism, split into socialism-cum-social-democracy and communism), and perceived as few in number: the big three at century's advent plus the two interwar totalitarianisms, despite lesser instances such as anarchism. Implicit was a view of plugging into an entire package, and of clearly defined and sealed boundaries that separated all five. Implicit, too, was a view that liberalism and conservatism were rather different kinds of packages, accompanied by their own resistance to be termed ideologies. The former appeared to be too flexible and open-ended to insist on rigid and total ideational solutions to political problems; while the latter deftly side-stepped the issue by claiming to purge its contents of political ideas altogether and to engage instead in piecemeal and unplanned institutional reactions to historical contingencies. If liberalism was not an ideology, it was through the definitional fiat of ideology as closed and doctrinaire; if conservatism was not one, it was through the definitional fiat of ideology as abstract and non-empirical. No wonder that the end of ideology could become a message of hope, if not of scholarly accuracy.

In the meantime, however, American political scientists were directing the cold eye of empiricism at a recently discovered, or recently appreciated, social phenomenon and employing the term 'ideology' to denote it. Political attitudes, opinions and evaluations were what constituted ideology and, crucially, they were not dissimulative. No attempt was made to argue for their underlying truth in the sense of being morally right or rationally valid. Rather, their truth was deemed to lie in their being a reliable vehicle and representation of what their bearers actually thought and preferred. Truth became a question of empirical accuracy. Robert Lane and Philip Converse were among the pioneers who applied behavioural positivism to these 'grassroots' positions of individuals and attempted to aggregate them into functional instruments of political participation, support or disapproval. Lane wished to expand ideology to signify not only articulated political arguments but also 'loosely structured, unreflective statements' of the common people,⁴ breaking away from the cohesion many philosophers expect of political thinking, as well as from the association of ideology with the

interests of a ruling class. Converse refined the study of mass publics by seeking regularities, compatibilities and constraints in their ideologies, and exploring their relationship to elite belief systems.⁵ Thus began the process of unpacking ideologies and looking at their internal components, often in a way that ill-matched the parts with the wholes they purportedly constituted.

One major outcome of these approaches was to present ideologies as democratically produced, a process whose embryonic origins emanated from the writings of Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci had repositioned ideology within the normal thought processes of individuals located in social groups. But these popular faiths, he argued, were still rudimentary and inchoate and had to be led by élites offering cohesion, direction and refinement to a thought-structure that was ultimately a homogeneous tool for revolution. Ideology, he held, could then transmogrify into truth.⁶ By contrast, the individualist conception of ideology offered by mid-century American political scientists exalted ideological fragmentation by permeating ideology with an atomized, person-centred, and pluralist value system. This was only one facet of changes in concrete Western ideologies which, through their formative fashioning by political parties or crucial interest groups, including the press and television, still presented hegemonic features of the kind identified by Gramsci. But political discourse, and the production and dissemination of ideologies, were certainly broadening out, with the major ideological families becoming more internally complex and variable due to the more diverse input upon which they could draw.

As a consequence, ideology was consciously reintroduced into liberalism, but only by renaming ideology – not as a total system of ideas installed from an unassailable ‘rationalist’ or political stratosphere, but as a manifestation of a pluralist multitude of views acting on a replaceable élite, emerging out of methodological individualism and subsumed within the insights of cognitive psychology. A counter-strategy was necessary in order to reinject theoretical cohesion and analytical power into a branch of political studies no longer able to rely on the Marxisant usages of ideology, irrelevant as they appeared to the understanding of Western political thought manifestations. Here anthropology and linguistics came to the rescue, with their notions of mapping, myths and symbols, all heavily dependent on interpretative frameworks through which to decode forms of thought-behaviour that were to a considerable degree non-transparent. Through a transition, mediated also via hermeneutics, to a focus on constructed and invented realities as necessary forms of reproducing knowledge and understanding, the concept of ideology regained both scholarly purchase and intellectual gravitas. In particular, the permanence of ideology could be asserted as against its evanescence in the Marxist approaches.

Rediscovering commonalities

Surely, though, people were not talking about the same thing? Surely the end of total and false systems was entirely separate from the semantic and cultural recapturing of diverse patterns of social meaning and communication across

societies? This 'two concepts of ideology' view is to a large extent misleading. What has taken place, rather, is a refinement and cross-fertilization of a sub-discipline which still shares in the broadest sense the common objective of accounting for and assessing the political thinking that aims to direct – or simply directs – the public activities of a society.

Far from witnessing the end of ideology, a plethora of new ideologies has continued to emerge (green ideology is one such instance), while older ideologies have been undergoing continuous processes of breaking-up and regrouping (as attested to by developments on the radical right, for example). Our sensitivity to these ideational births and rebirths has been considerably enhanced not only because of the vocal presence of political movements acting in the name of these ideologies, but because we are seeing a veritable explosion in the usages of ideology, which at the same time involves significant modifications in its conceptualizations. Shifts have occurred and are still occurring from an analytical concentration on macro-ideologies to an exploration of their micro-ingredients by political theorists and conceptual historians; from the detection of grand, full ideologies to thin, partial, or eclectic ones; from the study of overtly proclamatory ideologies employing conventional political language to psychoanalytical and symbolic modes of interpretation; and from an emphasis on the political values of ideology to a focus on the medium of language, the forms of human communication, and the ubiquity of style. The problem is that many of these developments are moving along different axes, apparently segregated from each other. But that is not equivalent to contending that they lack common denominators from which to assemble, perhaps even consolidate, a rich body of theory which serves, among others, as a subtle detector of undiscovered but already existing, as well as nascent, ideological phenomena.

Now that the dust has begun to settle, we can appreciate one remarkable legacy of the emergence of totalitarian ideologies, namely, that many of their attributes were simply exaggerated and contorted forms of features evident in all ideologies. By means of the critique of totalitarianism – and despite the contrary assertions of their promoters – ideologies were exposed as inconsistent, disharmonious, irrational, and inflexible, whereas 'decent' sets of political ideas put to public use aspired to logical consistency, to ethical harmony, to intellectual rationality, and to political flexibility. But that critique should have revealed not the untenability of ideology but its real complexity. Characteristics first emerging through a dismissive approach to extreme and inhumane ideologies were now perceived as widespread in all ideologies, though of course they were not always as preponderant or as weighty. In particular, irrationality had not previously been conceived of as the property of major political doctrines. So rather than separate the pure world of political theories and doctrines from these ideological abominations, inconsistency, disharmony, irrationality and inflexibility were – methodologically speaking – drawn into the former. An umbilical cord connected, for instance, liberalism with fascism – not in the sharing of core values, nor in their moral codes, but in the eclectic regularities that political thinking displayed in its actual usages and manifestations, as part of a social and linguistic

culture. Not the least part of that was the existence within liberalism of a non-negotiable core set of beliefs, one instance of which echoed Rousseau's famous injunction with regard to his civil religion: 'As for the negative dogmas, I would limit them to a single one: no intolerance'.⁷ As a result, political ideologies are now perceived to be centrally concerned with new themes: the management of inconsistency and indeterminacy (a consequence of the essential contestability of concepts and of the elusiveness of their signified subject matter); the recognition of emotion as a motive force in the construction of political argument (witness the resurgence of interest in the beneficial formation of group identity through nationalism, side by side with rational hybrids such as constitutional patriotism); the navigation through internal disharmony (pure unadulterated harmony is now assumed to be both impossible and undesirable within ideologies based, as they are, on multiple internal configurations in which dissonance and consonance jockey continuously for position); and the decontestation and closure of meaning and argument (at the very least with regard to core concepts) for variously limited stretches of time and space.

However, the developments of concrete ideologies over the century cannot be captured as a sequence of successive historical stages, as most of the forms and understandings noted above still exist as parallel or cumulative phenomena. What is, from a postmodern perspective, a process of fragmentation may well be one of differentiation from the standpoint of political ideas. That differentiation is closely linked to the rise of mass politics and its accompaniment, the mass media, but it is also a simple reflection of the entrance of new members into the often charmless circle of modernity. African socialisms, Indonesian guided democracy and South American liberation theology are examples of new political ideologies of the 1960s and 1970s which were spawned following on more intense contacts of the third world with the first, or of old worlds with new, and they belied the supposed stagnation that had befallen ideological expression. In Europe (and to a lesser extent the USA), though, new social movements were epitomizing the increasing detachment, initiated by socialists, of ideology formation and dissemination from political establishments. Conservatism, liberalism, communism and fascism had all been meticulously constructed and controlled by political, cultural and intellectual élites. Now, however, the opening up, if not extensive democratization, of manifold group discourse permitted a new range of forces to compete over the legitimization of public language and values: ecologists, feminists, the new left, neo-fascists. To begin with, the first three of these new ideational products were created by disaffected intellectuals, but they were rapidly taken over by wider social circles not as mere consumers but as opinion formers, programmatic entrepreneurs and originators of new political messages. The fate of green ideology in Germany is a case in point, based as it has been on diverse groups pulling in a number of disparate directions from an eclectic base of core beliefs.⁸

Eventually, the increasing mass-politicization of ideology caused a decline in its articulateness, as its public production no longer remained a monopoly of the so-called intelligentsia, many of whom retreated to semi-private – because highly

specialized and technical – political languages. It also caused a rupture in the public face of ideology, its modes of expression and loose unity, as a result of the centrifugal movement away from family membership of the grand ideologies. While on the one hand the style of the mass media was constraining the message, and ideological intricacies were reduced to oversimplified and consumer-friendly (or consumer-patronizing) sound-bites, on the other hand ideological arguments, and their second-order analysis, became increasingly complex. Intellectual ideological producers – both post-Marxists and Rawlsians spring to mind – removed themselves from the practice and language of politics and engaged in private discourses. They forsook the contest over the public meaning of words, and aspired instead to legitimate their interpretation through professional acclaim. The peregrinations of the term ‘liberal’ in the USA amply illustrate this rift between popular senses and the technical formulations of intellectual élites. Indeed, most members of such élites have lost confidence in their ability to act as an ideological vanguard in the more assertive and egalitarian democratic cultures that have developed in the course of the century.

Recent refinements

It is not uncommon to hear liberalism now described as history’s winner, without much consideration of the variant of liberalism that has supposedly won, of the widespread disaffection in the industrial world with the costs of liberal capitalism (an old-new theme), of the other kinds of ideology predominant in much of Asia or sweeping across the Muslim world or, perforce, of the criteria for ‘winning’ the ideological competition. Does this fly in the face of the emergence of Czech ‘Thatcherism’ and of new brands of American conservatism, as well as of contemporary nationalisms and feminisms? For a winner one has to have a finishing post and none of these contestants has yet collapsed exhausted in mid-course. Indeed, the current state of play suggests to the contrary that ideologies have, over the past decade or so, undergone further disintegration and re-formation. This perception is reinforced by the development of powerful (and occasionally esoteric) theoretical tools by which to analyse ideology.

Foremost among those is the emergence of postmodernism and post-structuralism at whose centre lies – as far as ideology is concerned – an extension of the Marxist project of ideological critique, but without those crucial elements of the Marxist conceptual framework that enable ideology to be transcended. For many scholars of that persuasion, ideology is a modernist remnant which requires exposure in order to identify the fictions produced by a social order bent on self-preservation or, as with the Lacanians, papering over the voids which belie the existence of such an order.⁹ It is a device that retains the hegemonic function of articulating meaning by constructing the unity of society out of its absence, out of antagonisms and dislocation.¹⁰ This view of ideology is post-Marxist in the sense that undistorted reality can no longer be discovered, because it may not exist. Thus ideology does not have a falsifying role and the aim

of the critique of ideology is not to supply truth but to underscore what has become, in effect, an inescapable ephemerality and contingency, which themselves assume the features of permanence. It is at odds with modernism because its notion of ideology does not appeal to rationality but regards ideology as surviving on the concealment of social chaos, and hence on non-transparency as the foundation of social order.

That undercurrent of irrational unintentionality coalesces, from a very different and more rational starting point, with the hermeneutic insistence on the multiplicity of meanings embedded in speech acts and texts. According to this school, intentionality is overtaken by the polysemy of thought and utterance as understood by readers and audiences. The language through which ideas are expressed requires constant interpretation and reinterpretation in order to accommodate changing temporal and spatial perspectives. This hermeneutic understanding of ideology combines the identification of empirical thought-practices with an emphasis on their consumption. Because of the constant variability in the group consumption of ideologies, a dynamism is introduced that secures the continuous durability of ideological life.

The effect of postmodernist standpoints has been to expand the signifier ideology to cover myriad types of cultural conduct and practice, and consequently to remove it from an exclusively political sphere while – which may be much the same thing – extending the sphere of the political to encompass an ultimately doomed struggle for control over words and language and what they signify. The relation of such analyses to the concrete world of political ideologies is thus multifold: they relegate them not to insignificance (for ideologies are obviously vital to preserve a semblance of order, even of comfort, in a fissiparous world) but to superficiality, to a veneer for an unfathomable reality, necessary but inherently fragile. They also present the world of political ideas as infinitely reconstitutable and hence bereft of moral anchorage: epic struggle among grand ideologies is replaced with a liquidity of ephemeral ideological combinations, a continuous patchwork on a quilt that is forever tearing apart at the seams. Internally, ideologies are proffered as structurally suspect, because structure itself is construed as an artefact, whether conscious or unconscious, and traditions of political thinking are interpreted as contingent stop-gaps, incidental historical continua. And as all ideologies are perceived as dancing to the same tune, their minutiae and differentiae become the object of soft focus, rather than of the meticulous analysis that political theorists apply to the details and units of their subject-matter.

Viewed, though, as a configuration of political thought, it is not always the most useful strategy to deny, or side-step, the importance of ideological structure. The problem is that it is unnecessary to have to choose between the permanent and the fortuitous, or between the true and the symbolic. Neither dichotomy is sustainable on its own. Ideologies construct fleeting, temporary and strictly circumscribed consistencies out of more fundamental, abstract and purist inconsistencies. The fleeting, however, can be held together in a number of combinations