

## The Errors of Ideology

This small book is a defense of prudential politics, as opposed to ideological politics. The author hopes to persuade the rising generation to set their faces against political fanaticism and utopian schemes, by which the world has been much afflicted since 1914. “Politics is the art of the possible,” the conservative says: he thinks of political policies as intended to preserve order, justice, and freedom.

The ideologue, on the contrary, thinks of politics as a revolutionary instrument for transforming society and even transforming human nature. In his march toward Utopia, the ideologue is merciless.

Ever since the end of the Second World War, the tendency of American public opinion has been more or less conservative. But there exists some danger that conservatives themselves might slip into a narrow ideology or quasi-ideology—even though, as H. Stuart Hughes wrote some forty years ago, “Conservatism is the negation of ideology.”

This book, then, is addressed to conservatives especially. Its chapters are essays (originally lectures) examining conservative principles, people, books, and problems, and contrasting conservative views with ideological dogmas.

In this present first chapter, I distinguish between conservative beliefs and ideology. In the following four chapters, I discuss conservative principles, events of a conservative significance, conservative books, and conservative leaders—ten of each. Next, in Chapters VI, VII, VIII, and IX, I describe four conservative writers of the twentieth century. In chapters X, XI, XII, and XIII, I examine four types or factions of American conservatives. After that, in chapters XIV, XV, XVI, and XVII, I take up conundrums for conservatives—questions of foreign policy,

political centralization, educational standards, and the American proletariat. In my concluding chapter, I fulminate against the ideology of Democratism, *vox populi vox Dei*. Permit me to commence with an attempt to define *ideology*.

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The word *ideology* was coined in Napoleonic times. Destutt de Tracy, the author of *Les éléments d'idéologie* (five volumes, 1801-15), was an abstract intellectual of the sort since grown familiar on the Left Bank of the Seine, the haunt of all budding ideologues, among them in recent decades the famous liberator of Democratic Kampuchea, Pol Pot. Tracy and his disciples intended a widespread reform of education, to be founded upon an alleged science of ideas; they drew heavily upon the psychology of Condillac and more remotely upon that of John Locke.

Rejecting religion and metaphysics, these original ideologues believed that they could discover a system of natural laws—which system, if conformed to, could become the foundation of universal harmony and contentment. Doctrines of self-interest, economic productivity, and personal liberty were bound up with these notions. Late-born children of the dying Enlightenment, the Ideologues assumed that systematized knowledge derived from sensation could perfect society through ethical and educational methods and by well-organized political direction.

Napoleon dismissed the Ideologues with the remark that the world is governed not by abstract ideas, but by imagination. John Adams called this new-fangled *ideology* “the science of idiocy.” Nevertheless, during the nineteenth century ideologues sprang up as if someone, like Jason, had sown dragons’ teeth that turned into armed men. These ideologues generally have been enemies to religion, tradition, custom, convention, prescription, and old constitutions.

The concept of ideology was altered considerably in the middle of the nineteenth century, by Karl Marx and his school. Ideas, Marx argued, are nothing better than expressions of class interests, as related to economic production. Ideology, the alleged science of ideas, thus becomes a systematic apology for the claims of a class—nothing more.

Or, to put this argument in Marx's own blunt and malicious terms, what has been called political philosophy is merely a mask for the economic self-seeking of oppressors—so the Marxists declared. Ruling ideas and norms constitute a delusive mask upon the face of the dominant class, shown to the exploited "as a standard of conduct, partly to varnish, partly to provide moral support for, domination." So Marx wrote to Engels.

Yet the exploited too, Marx says, develop systems of ideas to advance their revolutionary designs. So what we call Marxism is an ideology intended to achieve revolution, the triumph of the proletariat, and eventually communism. To the consistent Marxist, ideas have no value in themselves: they, like all art, are worthwhile only as a means to achieve equality of condition and economic satisfaction. While deriding the ideologies of all other persuasions, the Marxist builds with patient cunning his own ideology.

Although it has been the most powerful of ideologies, Marxism—very recently diminished in strength—has competitors: various forms of nationalism, negritude, feminism, fascism (a quasi-ideology never fully fleshed out in Italy), nazism (an ideology in embryo, Hannah Arendt wrote), syndicalism, anarchism, social democracy, and Lord knows what all. Doubtless yet more forms of ideology will be concocted during the twenty-first century.

Kenneth Minogue, in his recent book *Alien Powers: the Pure Theory of Ideology*, uses the word "to denote any doctrine which presents the hidden and saving truth about the world in the form of social analysis. It is a feature of all such

doctrines to incorporate a general theory of the mistakes of everybody else.” That “hidden and saving truth” is a fraud—a complex of contrived falsifying “myths”, disguised as history, about the society we have inherited. Raymond Aron, in *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, analyzes the three myths that have seduced Parisian intellectuals: the myths of the Left, of the Revolution, of the Proletariat.

To summarize the analysis of ideology undertaken by such scholars as Minogue, Aron, J. L. Talmon, Thomas Molnar, Lewis Feuer, and Hans Barth, this word *ideology*, since the Second World War, usually has signified a dogmatic political theory which is an endeavor to substitute secular goals and doctrines for religious goals and doctrines; and which promises to overthrow present dominations so that the oppressed may be liberated. Ideology’s promises are what Talmon calls “political messianism”. The ideologue promises salvation in this world, hotly declaring that there exists no other realm of being. Eric Voegelin, Gerhart Niemeyer, and other writers have emphasized that ideologues “immanentize the symbols of transcendence”—that is, corrupt the vision of salvation through grace in death into false promises of complete happiness in this mundane realm.

Ideology, in short, is a political formula that promises mankind an earthly paradise; but in cruel fact what ideology has created is a series of terrestrial hells. I set down below some of the vices of ideology.

- 1) Ideology is inverted religion, denying the Christian doctrine of salvation through grace in death, and substituting collective salvation here on earth through violent revolution. Ideology inherits the fanaticism that sometimes has afflicted religious faith, and applies that intolerant belief to concerns secular.
- 2) Ideology makes political compromise impossible: the ideologue will accept no deviation from the Absolute Truth of his secular revelation. This

narrow vision brings about civil war, extirpation of “reactionaries”, and the destruction of beneficial functioning social institutions.

3) Ideologues vie one with another in fancied fidelity to their Absolute Truth; and they are quick to denounce deviationists or defectors from their party orthodoxy. Thus fierce factions are raised up among the ideologues themselves, and they war mercilessly and endlessly upon one another, as did Trotskyites and Stalinists.

The evidence of ideological ruin lies all about us. How then can it be that the allurements of ideology retain great power in much of the world?

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The answer to that question is given in part by this observation from Raymond Aron: “When the intellectual feels no longer attached either to the community or the religion of his forebears, he looks to progressive ideology to fill the vacuum. The main difference between the progressivism of the disciple of Harold Laski or Bertrand Russell and the Communism of the disciple of Lenin concerns not so much the *content* as the *style* of the ideologies and the allegiance they demand.”

Ideology provides sham religion and sham philosophy, comforting in its way to those who have lost or never have known genuine religious faith, and to those not sufficiently intelligent to apprehend real philosophy. The fundamental reason why we must set our faces against ideology—so wrote the wise Swiss editor Hans Barth—is that ideology is opposed to truth: it denies the possibility of truth in politics or in anything else, substituting economic motive and class interest for abiding norms. Ideology even denies human consciousness and power of choice. In Barth’s words, “The disastrous effect of ideological thinking in its radical form is not only to cast doubt on the quality and structure of the mind that constitute man’s distinguishing characteristic but also to undermine the foundation of his social life.”

Ideology may attract the bored man of the Knowledge Class who has cut himself off from religion and community, and who desires to exercise power. Ideology may enchant young people, wretchedly schooled, who in their loneliness stand ready to cast their latent enthusiasm into any exciting and violent cause. And ideologues' promises may win a following among social groups that feel pushed to the wall—even though such recruits may not understand much of anything about the ideologues' doctrines. The early composition of the Nazi party is sufficient illustration of an ideology's power to attract disparate elements of this sort.

On the first page of this introductory chapter I suggested that some Americans, conservatively-inclined ones among them, might embrace an ideology of Democratic Capitalism, or New World Order, or International Democratism. Yet most Americans with a sneaking fondness for the word *ideology* are not seeking to sweep away violently all existing dominations and powers. What such people really mean when they call for a “democratic ideology” is a formula for a civil religion, an ideology of Americanism, or perhaps of the Free World. A trouble with this civil-religion notion is that the large majority of Americans think they already have a religion of their own, not one cobbled up by some department in Washington. If the approved civil religion, or mild ideology, should be designed, by some subtle process, to supplant the congeries of creeds at present flourishing in this land—why, such hostility toward belief in the transcendent, such contempt for the “higher religions”, is precisely the most bitter article in the creed of those ideologies which have ravaged the world for the past eight decades.

Yet possibly all that is intended by enthusiasts for this proposed new anti-communist ideology is a declaration of political principles and economic concepts, to be widely promulgated, legislatively approved as a guide to public policy, and taught in public schools. If this is all, then why insist upon labeling the notion an ideology? An innocent ideology is as unlikely a contraption as

Christian Diabolism; to attach the sinister tag “ideology” would be like inviting friends to a harmless Hallowe’en bonfire, but announcing the party as the new Holocaust.

If this “democratic ideology” should turn out, in practice, to be nothing worse than a national civics program for public schools, still it would require being watched jealously. Cloying praise in every classroom of the beauties of democratic capitalism would bore most pupils and provoke revulsion among the more intelligent. And it is not civics courses, primarily, that form minds and consciences of the rising generation: rather, it is the study of humane letters. I should not wish to see what remains of literary studies in the typical public school supplanted by an official propaganda about the holiness of the American Way or of the Free World Way or of the Democratic Capitalist Way.

I am not of the opinion that it would be well to pour the heady wine of a new ideology down the throats of the American young. If one summons spirits from the vasty deep, can they be conjured back again? What we need to impart is political prudence, not political belligerence. Ideology is the disease, not the cure. All ideologies, including the ideology of *vox populi vox dei*, are hostile to enduring order and justice and freedom. For ideology is the politics of passionate unreason.

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Permit me, then, to set down here, in a few paragraphs, some reflections on political prudence, as opposed to ideology.

To be “prudent” means to be judicious, cautious, sagacious. Plato, and later Burke, instruct us that in the statesman, prudence is the first of the virtues. A prudent statesman is one who looks before he leaps; who takes long views; who knows that politics is the art of the possible.

A few pages ago I specified three profound errors of the ideological politician. Now I contrast with those three failings certain principles of the politics of prudence.

1) As I put it earlier, ideology is inverted religion. But the prudential politician knows that “Utopia” means “Nowhere”; that we cannot march to an earthly Zion; that human nature and human institutions are imperfectible; that aggressive “righteousness” in politics ends in slaughter. True religion is a discipline for the soul, not for the state.

2) Ideology makes political compromise impossible, I pointed out. The prudential politician, *au contraire*, is well aware that the primary purpose of the state is to keep the peace. This can be achieved only by maintaining a tolerable balance among great interests in society. Parties, interests, and social classes and groups must arrive at compromises, if bowie-knives are to be kept from throats. When ideological fanaticism rejects any compromise, the weak go to the wall. The ideological atrocities of the “Third World” in recent decades illustrate this point: the political massacres of the Congo, Timor, Equatorial Guinea, Chad, Cambodia, Uganda, Yemen, Salvador, Afghanistan, and Somalia. Prudential politics strives for conciliation, not extirpation.

3) Ideologies are plagued by ferocious factionalism, on the principle of brotherhood—or death. Revolutions devour their children. But prudential politicians, rejecting the illusion of an Absolute Political Truth before which every citizen must abase himself, understand that political and economic structures are not mere products of theory, to be erected one day and demolished the next; rather, social institutions develop over centuries, almost as if they were organic. The radical reformer, proclaiming himself omniscient, strikes down every rival, to arrive at the Terrestrial Paradise more swiftly. Conservatives, in striking contrast, have the habit of dining with the opposition.



In the preceding sentence, I employed deliberately the word *conservative* as synonymous, virtually, with the expression “prudential politician”. For it is the conservative leader who, setting his face against all ideologies, is guided by what Patrick Henry called “the lamp of experience”. In this twentieth century, it has been the body of opinion generally called “conservative” that has defended the Permanent Things from ideologues’ assaults.

Ever since the end of the Second World War, the American public has looked with increasing favor upon the term *conservative*. Public-opinion polls suggest that in politics, the majority of voters regard themselves as conservatives. Whether they well understand conservatives’ political principles may be another matter.

Halfway through the second administration of President Reagan, an undergraduate of my acquaintance was conversing in Washington with a young man who had secured a political appointment in the general government. That fledgling public man commenced to talk of a “conservative ideology”. The college student somewhat sharply reminded him of the sinister signification of that word “ideology”. “Well, you know what I mean,” the youthful politician replied, somewhat lamely.

Yet it is doubtful if the officeholder himself knew precisely what he had meant. Did he fancy that *ideology* signifies a body of well-reasoned political principles? Did he desire to discover a set of simplistic formulas by which capitalism might be extended over all the world? Or did he indeed wish to overthrow by violent action our existing social order and to substitute an artificial society nearer to his heart’s desire?

We live in a time when the signification of old words, like much else, has become insecure. “Words strain,/Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,” as T. S.

Eliot puts it. In the beginning was the Word. But nowadays the Word is confronted by Giant Ideology, which perverts the word, spoken and written.

It is not merely the rising political talents of our age that fail to apprehend the proper employment of important words—and particularly misunderstand the usage of *ideology*. An elderly lady writes to me in defense of yesteryear's movement called Moral Rearmament, which three decades ago claimed to provide America with an ideology. "Perhaps I am wrong, but it has always seemed to me that Ideology means the power of ideas," this correspondent states. "The world is run by ideas, good ones or bad ones. We need a great idea or ideal to replace the false ideas that dominate today. How long can we survive as a free nation when the word *freedom* has been corrupted?"

This lady's concluding point is a keen one. But I must add, "How long can we survive as a free nation when the word *ideology*, with its corrupting power, is mistaken for a guardian of ordered liberty?"

I do not mean to mock; for I encounter this confusion among people whom I know well and respect heartily. One such, a woman who is an able writer and a bold spirit, retorts that her dictionaries—Webster and Oxford—disagree with Russell Kirk's more lengthy definition of *ideology*. "If Oxford is right and ideology means 'the science of ideas', could they not be good ideas? I quite agree that many ideologies do great harm, but surely not all? In any event, I'm a congenital pragmatist," she concludes, "and semantics are not my strong point."

Nay, madam, *all* ideologies work mischief. I am fortified by a letter from an influential and seasoned conservative publicist, who applauds my excoriation of young ideologues fancying themselves to be conservatives, and of young conservatives fondly hoping to convert themselves into ideologues. This latter correspondent agrees with me that ideology is founded merely upon "ideas"—that is, upon abstractions, fancies, for the most part unrelated to personal and

social reality; while conservative views are founded upon custom, convention, the long experience of the human species. He finds himself confronted, from time to time, by young people, calling themselves conservative, who have no notion of prudence, temperance, compromise, the traditions of civility, or cultural patrimony.

“The woods are full of these creatures,” this gentleman writes. “The conservative ‘movement’ seems to have reared up a new generation of rigid ideologists. It distresses me to find them as numerous and in so many institutions. Of course, many are libertarians, not conservatives. Whatever they call themselves, they are bad for the country and our civilization. Theirs is a cold-blooded, brutal view of life.”

Amen to that. Is conservatism an ideology? Only if, with Humpty Dumpty, we claim the prerogative of forcing words to mean whatever we desire them to signify, so that “It’s a question of who’s to be master, that’s all.” Let us conservatives conserve the English language, along with many other surviving good things. Let us raise up the banner of honest and accurate vocabulary. Let us venture, whatever the odds, to contend against ideologues’ Newspeak. The triumph of ideology would be the triumph of what Edmund Burke called “the antagonist world”—the world of disorder; while what the conservative seeks to conserve is the world of order that we have inherited, if in a damaged condition, from our ancestors. The conservative mind and the ideological mind stand at opposite poles. And the contest between those two mentalities may be no less strenuous in the twenty-first century than it has been during the twentieth. Possibly this book of mine may be of help to those of the rising generation who have the courage to oppose ideological zealots.