

"What is an Ideology and Do We Need It?",  
in: Dennis V. Razis, ed., *The Human Predicament.*  
*An International Dialogue on the Meaning of Human Behavior,*  
Prometheus Books, Amherst, New York 1996, pp. 243-251.

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## What Is an Ideology and Do We Need It?

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**I**n his opening address to the Delphi conference Dr. Razis pointed at one of the aims of the conference: to develop a holistic point of view towards global problems. The desired result of the conference was described as the definition of modern humanism, the development of strategies to prevent a global catastrophe, and the establishment of an international society dedicated to the survival of the human species. Razis was well aware, however, that this undertaking sounds rather idealistic. And yet it is necessary. We may perhaps even be pushed together toward a unity that has only previously been imagined by religions. The message for the future is, Razis tells us, "cooperate or perish."

In this article I will not address the problems of our time directly. I will not talk about the population explosion, the deterioration of the ecosystem, and other developments which might render our planet uninhabitable. I will try to reflect on our attempt to tackle world problems in general. This will be a "metaperspective."

One of the aims of this conference is to develop a *comprehensive approach to social and political problems*. The presupposition is that by combining various scientific insights it is possible to develop a comprehensive approach to problems. However, this way of thinking has come under attack nowadays. Many important thinkers challenge the pretension to develop a comprehensive approach to global problems. A discussion has been going on for some time about the end of ideology, the end of life- and worldviews, the end of all comprehensive thinking. According to postmodernist thinkers like Jean François Lyotard<sup>1</sup> and other influential political philosophers such as Francis Fukuyama, we are now in a specific phase or condition of development that can be characterized as the end of ideology, the end of history, or the end of the grand narratives. That brings us to a rather paradoxical position. On the one hand, one of the most prominent elements of our present predicament is that we need a collective, comprehensive, and global approach. On the other hand, leading intellectuals stress the prevalence of individualism, fragmentation, and the futility of attempts to use theoretical reasoning to develop a consistent sets of ideas to solve our problems.

The most clear thinker in this tradition of "endism" is, in my opinion, Fukuyama. He states that we are at the end of ideology. Socialism, fascism, and communism have had their day. There are no rivals left for liberalism to compete with.<sup>2</sup> That would point in the direction of *one* ideology as the sole victor of ideological strife, but because ideology is only possible in contrast to competing ideologies, the end of ideology is in a certain sense also the end of the ideology of liberalism.

Although these general traits of the end-of-ideology debate are clear, there is still much that remains to be clarified. Neither Lyotard nor other proponents of the end of ideology give us a very clear idea of the implications of their stance. Should every general idea of what we stand for from now on be rejected as illusory? Should every

attempt to justify our actions from the perspective of a general framework of ideas be cast aside as stillborn? That would be an impoverishment of the human condition, and one of the most important aims of the Delphi Society, to wit, to develop a general framework for the solutions of global problems, would be barren. I would like to challenge those postmodern and otherwise nihilistic trends in modern culture and make a new case for developing ideologies that may help us to overcome our present problems.

In this commentary, I will outline three conceptions of ideology. Only after this semantic propaedeutic work can we tackle some other relevant questions such as: (1) Is it indeed true that ideology in the sense outlined is at an end? and (2) Is it *desirable* that ideology will be exhausted? The result of my analysis is that ideology in the third sense, ideology as the coherent presentation of our political convictions, has to be revitalized. As a matter of fact, one of the aims of the Delphi Society is to develop a new ideology to save us from global catastrophe.

### **Ideology as the Veil of Interests**

The first concept of ideology I want to address is ideology as the veil of interests. This is the concept of ideology as it has been used by Karl Marx, and that by means of his work exerted an enormous influence on social and political thought in the twentieth century.

The reasoning of those who use this concept of ideology is not difficult to understand. The quintessence of their approach to the social order is the concept of *power*. Like Hobbes, they say that every human being and every group of humans yearns for power. The oppressor can suppress those subjected to his power by physical means. But no government can ever be based merely on physical power, because even the most powerful tyrant still has to sleep. In that situation, at least, the palace guard has to accept power as based on other

grounds than the exertion of physical power. This line of reasoning brought David Hume to the idea that in the end power is always based on opinion: the voluntary subjection of people to the authority of others.<sup>3</sup> We can also put the matter as follows: power must be transformed into *authority* to be effective in the long run.

The intriguing question then is: How can somebody with power attain authority? How does he make the suppressed *believe* his power is legitimate? Now the notion of ideology appears on the scene. The suppressor uses the idea of "ideology": a sophistic assemblage of reasoning that has the sole end of consoling people about their fate.

In the history of political thought very few people have been prepared to defend ideology in this sense. Most of the great political thinkers have been critics of this type of ideology. The most famous such critic was, of course, Karl Marx.

Another question is: *Will* ideology in the sense of the veil of interests disappear? It is possible that one *hopes* it will vanish but at the same time be pessimistic about the chances of this happening. People will always invent new ideologies to justify their privileges. Ideology will be with us until we are in the utopian situation that there is no inequality between people, that is, in heaven.

This is the pessimistic view. The more optimistic vision is that of the Enlightenment. In his well-known essay "Beantwortung der Frage: Was Ist Aufklärung?" Immanuel Kant epitomized the ideals of the Enlightenment with the Horatian adage, "Aude sapere."<sup>4</sup> By critically using our intellectual capacities, man can free himself of superstition and take the lead of his own life.

### Ideology as Illusory Speculation

A second concept of ideology we have to discuss is the use of the word in another derogatory sense: ideology as the accumulation of idealistic, pretentious principles, thought out by philosophers in their

ivory towers, without relevance for practical-minded politicians and other well-thinking people. In this sense the word was coined by Napoleon.

The meaning of the word in the sense Napoleon used it is still in vogue. The concept of ideology first appeared in the work of the French philosopher Antoine Destutt de Tracy (1754-1836), who used the word "ideology" in 1796 to mean a science of ideas, a program of reductive semantic analysis that would lead to institutional reforms, beginning with a sweeping reform of French schools. Napoleon was initially sympathetic to the ideas of Destutt de Tracy and his circle, but later he became estranged from their work and dismissed the "ideologues" as impractical visionaries.<sup>5</sup>

Although Marx adopted the Napoleonic fashion of using "ideology" as a term of contempt, there is a significant difference in the way Napoleon uses the word and the way Marx would later use it. For Napoleon ideology was the idle speculation of the powerless against those who wield power, whereas according to Marx it was mainly the powerful that used ideology to suppress the weak. However, both agreed on rejecting ideology as misleading.

### Ideology as Coherent Presentation of Our Political Conviction

Finally, I will treat a third conception of ideology. This time it is the concept in a neutral, a nonderogatory sense. It is ideology as the *comprehensive, systematized, and coherent presentation of our political convictions*. In this sense the word is used in the titles of books on political ideologies. When John Gray writes about *Liberalism*,<sup>6</sup> Bernard Crick on *Socialism*,<sup>7</sup> or Ted Honderich on *Conservatism*,<sup>8</sup> these writers are not engaged in presenting liberalism as false consciousness or socialism as an assemblage of useless speculation. They present us a more-or-less neutral (although in some

ways critical) presentation of what those political ideologies stand for. I favor this last semantic approach of the word "ideology."

That means that it is very important to distinguish this last conception of ideology sharply from the other two. One can be vehemently opposed to ideology in the first two senses, but still be enthusiastic about ideology in the third sense. Actually, that is the stance I would venture to defend in this article. That defense has two dimensions. I will contend, first, the normative claim that developing an ideology as a global perspective in the third sense is a valuable human enterprise and, second, that ideology as the coherent presentation of our political convictions will never vanish.

The first thesis entails the task of refuting the much-advanced claim that ideology in the third sense necessarily leads to ideology in one of the first two senses. But let us first try to frame a more elaborate idea of what ideology in the third sense can be. First, it is a *total* vision of political reality. It tries to develop a concept of society as a whole, at least from the perspective of political thought. It brings also a certain *coherence* to our political ideas and tries to give a *justification* for them.<sup>9</sup> Political ideology in the nonderogatory sense is concerned with questions such as the following: What is the proper ambit of state activity? How do we visualize the relation of the individual to the state? Does society rest on an overlapping consensus of values? Do individuals have any natural rights?

Characteristic of ideology in the third sense is that we try to bring our conviction *A* in relation to conviction *B*. We do not feel satisfied with a chaotic mass of atomistic ideas and feelings toward political and social problems, but we try to see some unity, some conceptual framework, in our ideas. One of the aims of the Delphi Society has to do with this specific striving.

Most people hesitate to assert that they have an ideology. They consider themselves to be concerned with concrete and pragmatic questions, not with such philosophical activities as developing a vi-

sion of reality as a whole. Many people will even envisage this as a somewhat pompous affair, and some as superfluous. Yet, when they are confronted with some shocking events they are usually less hesitant in presenting their reasons for their indignation. When pressed further, they even give a justification for their anger, bringing those reasons in harmony with each other. What happens is that gradually something of a coherent set of ideas comes to the fore. Step by step the person in question is presenting her coherent and systematized set of ideas and explaining the relation of these ideas towards each other.

Take the case of Salman Rushdie. When he was sentenced to death by Iranian fanatics, a wave of indignation spread across the Western world about this fundamentalist medievalism. Demonstrations were held, discussions organized, petitions of adherence presented, and so on. What was especially striking was that people who had never thought about the right of free speech suddenly felt themselves obliged to stand for it, in deeds as well as for the justification of this important democratic principle. Cultural relativism is usually at a low ebb in those kinds of confrontations. People suddenly realize that their ideas are not contingent facts of life and that principles such as free speech (or for that matter freedom of religion) are not the arbitrary makeup of this liberal society, but that these principles have a justification and that people can be asked to justify their principles.

I do not hesitate to say that in the face of our current problems we will develop new schemes, new global approaches, and that we will reject the postmodern, nihilistic tendencies of contemporary thought.

## Notes

1. Compare Jean-François Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1979), and *Le Postmoderne expliqué aux enfants* (Paris: Éditions Galiée, 1988), pp. 35ff.

2. Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?" *The National Interest*,

(Summer 1989), and *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).

3. Compare the commentary in A.V. Dicey, *An Introduction to the Study of the Law of the Constitution* (London 1987 [1885]), p. 77.

4. Immanuel Kant, *Schriften zur Anthropologie, Geschichtsphilosophie, Politik und Pädagogik I*, vol. 11 (Frankfurt am Main: Wilhelm Weischedel, Suhrkamp, 1964), pp. 53ff.

5. Compare David Braybrooke, "Ideology," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Paul Edwards, ed., vol. 4 (New York: Macmillan, 1967), p. 127.

6. John Gray, *Liberalism* (Open University Press, Milton Keynes, 1986).

7. Bernard Crick, *Socialism* (Open University Press, Milton Keynes, 1987).

8. Ted Honderich, *Conservatism* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1991 [1990]).

9. Compare Stephen Macedo, *Liberal Virtues: Citizenship, Virtue, and Community in Liberal Constitutionalism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp. 39 ff.