CHAPTER 2
Political Ideas and Ideologies

‘The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways: the point is to change it.’
Karl Marx, Theses on Feuerbach (1845)

PREVIEW

All people are political thinkers. Whether they know it or not, people use political ideas and concepts whenever they express their opinions or speak their mind. Everyday language is littered with terms such as freedom, fairness, equality, justice and rights. In the same way, words such as conservative, liberal, fascist, socialist or feminist are regularly employed by people either to describe their own views, or those of others. However, even though such terms are familiar, even commonplace, they are seldom used with any precision or a clear grasp of their meaning. What, for instance, is ‘equality’? What does it mean to say that all people are equal? Are people born equal, should they be treated by society as if they are equal? Should people have equal rights, equal opportunities, equal political influence, equal wages? Similarly, words such as communist or fascist are commonly misused. What does it mean to call someone a ‘fascist’? What values or beliefs do fascists hold, and why do they hold them? How do communist views differ from those of, say, liberals, conservatives or socialists? This chapter examines political ideas from the perspective of the key ideological traditions. It focuses, in particular, on the ‘classical’ ideologies (liberalism, conservatism and socialism), but it also considers a range of other ideological traditions, which have arisen either out of, or in opposition to, the classical ones. Each ideological tradition constitutes a distinctive intellectual framework or paradigm, and so offers a particular ‘lens’ on political world. However, before examining the various ideological traditions, it is necessary to consider the nature of political ideology itself.

KEY ISSUES

• What is political ideology?
• Is politics intrinsically linked to ideology? Can ideology come to an end?
• What are the key ideas and theories of the major ideological traditions?
• What internal tensions do each of the major ideologies encompass?
• How has ideological thought changed over time?
• How can the rise and fall of ideologies be explained?
WHAT IS POLITICAL IDEOLOGY?

Ideology is one of the most controversial concepts encountered in political analysis. Although the term now tends to be used in a neutral sense, to refer to a developed social philosophy or world-view, it has in the past had heavily negative or pejorative connotations. During its sometimes tortuous career, the concept of ideology has commonly been used as a political weapon to condemn or criticize rival creeds or doctrines.

The term ‘ideology’ was coined in 1796 by the French philosopher Destutt de Tracy (1754–1836). He used it to refer to a new ‘science of ideas’ (literally, an idea-ology) that set out to uncover the origins of conscious thought and ideas. De ‘Tracy’s hope was that ideology would eventually enjoy the same status as established sciences such as zoology and biology. However, a more enduring meaning was assigned to the term in the nineteenth century in the writings of Karl Marx (see p. 41). For Marx, ideology amounted to the ideas of the ‘ruling class’, ideas that therefore uphold the class system and perpetuate exploitation. In their early work *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels wrote the following:

> The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which has the means of mental production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production. (Marx and Engels, [1846] 1970:64)

The defining feature of ideology in the Marxist sense is that it is false: it mystifies and confuses subordinate classes by concealing from them the contradictions on which all class societies are based. As far as capitalism is concerned, the ideology of the property-owning bourgeoisie (bourgeois ideology) fosters delusion or ‘false consciousness’ amongst the exploited proletariat, preventing them from recognizing the fact of their own exploitation. Nevertheless, Marx did not believe that all political views had an ideological character. He held that his own work, which attempted to uncover the process of class exploitation and oppression, was scientific. In his view, a clear distinction could be drawn between science and ideology, between truth and falsehood. This distinction tended, however, to be blurred in the writings of later Marxists such as Lenin (see p. 99) and Gramsci (see p. 175). These referred not only to ‘bourgeois ideology’, but also to ‘socialist ideology’ or ‘proletarian ideology’, terms that Marx would have considered absurd.

Alternative uses of the term have also been developed by liberals and conservatives. The emergence of totalitarian dictatorships in the interwar period encouraged writers such as Karl Popper (1902–94), J. L. Talmon and Hannah Arendt (see p. 7) to view ideology as an instrument of social control to ensure compliance and subordination. Relying heavily on the examples of fascism and communism, this Cold War liberal use of the term treated ideology as a ‘closed’ system of thought, which, by claiming a monopoly of truth, refuses to tolerate opposing ideas and rival beliefs. In contrast, liberalism, based as it is on a fundamental commitment to individual freedom, and doctrines such as conservatism and democratic socialism that broadly subscribe to liberal principles are clearly not ideologies. These doctrines are ‘open’ in the sense that they permit, and even insist on, free debate, opposition and criticism.

**CONCEPT**

**Ideology**

From a social-scientific viewpoint, an ideology is a more or less coherent set of ideas that provides a basis for organized political action, whether this is intended to preserve, modify or overthrow the existing system of power relationships. All ideologies therefore (1) offer an account of the existing order, usually in the form of a ‘world-view’, (2) provide a model of a desired future, a vision of the Good Society, and (3) outline how political change can and should be brought about. Ideologies are not, however, hermetically sealed systems of thought; rather, they are fluid sets of ideas that overlap with one another at a number of points.
The term ‘ideology’ has traditionally carried pejorative implications, often expressed through predictions of its imminent (and usually welcome) demise. Nevertheless, despite its varied obituaries, political ideology has stubbornly refused to die: while particular ideologies may rise or fall, ideological forms of politics seem to be an enduring feature of world history.

Is politics intrinsically linked to ideology? Or may politics finally be able to emerge from the shadow cast by ideological belief?

**Debating . . .**

**Can politics exist without ideology?**

**YES**

**Overcoming falsehood and delusion.** Most critiques of ideology associate it with falsehood and manipulation, implying that reason and critical understanding can, and will, emancipate us from ideological politics. In this view, ideologies are, in effect, political religions, sets of values, theories and doctrines that demand faith and commitment from ‘believers’, who are then unable to think outside or beyond their chosen world-view. If ideologies are intellectual prisons, the solution is to see the world ‘as it is’, something that can be achieved through the application of value-free scientific method. The purpose of political science is thus to disengage politics from ideology.

**Rise of technocratic politics.** Political ideology arose in the form of contrasting attempts to shape emergent industrial society. The left/right divide (see p. 225) and the struggle between socialism and capitalism has always been at the heart of ideological debate. However, the collapse of communism and the near worldwide acceptance of market capitalism means that this rivalry has become irrelevant to modern politics. Politics has therefore come to revolve not around ideological questions to do with ownership and the distribution of wealth, but around ‘smaller’ questions to do with the effective management of the capitalist system. Ideological politics has given way to technocratic politics.

**Rise of consumerist politics.** Ideology has little place in modern democratic systems due to the logic of electoral competition. Elections force political parties to behave like businesses in the marketplace, formulating ‘products’ (policies) in the hope of attracting the largest number of ‘consumers’ (voters). Parties thus increasingly respond to consumer/voter demands, rather than trying to reshape these demands in the light of a pre-existing ideological vision. Whether parties have historically been left-wing, right-wing or centrist in orientation, they recognise the electoral value of ‘travelling light’ in ideological terms. Electoral politics therefore contributes to a process of party de-ideologization.

**NO**

**Ideology as an intellectual framework.** Political ideology will always survive because it provides politicians, parties and other political actors with an intellectual framework which helps them to make sense of the world in which they live. Ideologies are not systematic delusions but, rather, rival visions of the political world, each illuminating particular aspects of a complex and multifaceted reality. Ideologies are therefore neither, in a simplistic sense, true nor false. Perhaps the most dangerous delusion is the notion of a clear distinction between science and ideology. Science itself is constructed on the basis of paradigms that are destined to be displaced over time (Kuhn, 1962).

**Ideological renewal.** The secret of ideology’s survival and continued relevance is its flexibility, the fact that ideological traditions go through a seemingly endless process of redefinition and renewal. As old ideologies fade, new ones emerge, helping to preserve the relevance of political ideology. The world of ideologies does not stand still, but changes in response to changing social and historical circumstances. The declining relevance of the left/right divide has not led to the ‘end of ideology’ or the ‘end of history’; it has merely opened up new ideological spaces that have been filled by the likes of feminism, green politics, multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism.

**The ‘vision thing’.** As the principal source of meaning and idealism in politics, ideology touches those aspects of politics that no other political form can reach. Ideology gives people a reason to believe in something larger than themselves, because people’s personal narratives only make sense when they are situated within a broader historical narrative. A post-ideological age would therefore be an age without hope, without vision. If politicians cannot cloak their pursuit of power in ideological purpose, they risk being seen simply as power-seeking pragmatists, and their policy programmes will appear to lack coherence and direction.
A distinctively conservative use of the term ‘ideology’ has been developed by thinkers such as Michael Oakeshott (see p. 177). This view reflects a characteristically conservative scepticism about the value of rationalism, born out of the belief that the world is largely beyond the capacity of the human mind to fathom. As Oakeshott put it, in political activity ‘men sail a boundless and bottomless sea’. From this perspective, ideologies are seen as abstract ‘systems of thought’; that is, as sets of ideas that distort political reality because they claim to explain what is, frankly, incomprehensible. This is why conservatives have traditionally dismissed the notion that they subscribe to an ideology, preferring instead to describe conservatism as a disposition, or an ‘attitude of mind’, and placing their faith in pragmatism, tradition (see p. 82) and history.

The drawback of each of these usages, however, is that, as they are negative or pejorative, they restrict the application of the term. Certain political doctrines, in other words, are excluded from the category of ‘ideologies’. Marx, for instance, insisted that his ideas were scientific, not ideological, liberals have denied that liberalism should be viewed as an ideology, and conservatives have traditionally claimed to embrace a pragmatic rather than ideological style of politics. Moreover, each of these definitions is loaded with the values and orientation of a particular political doctrine. An inclusive definition of ‘ideology’ (one that applies to all political traditions) must therefore be neutral: it must reject the notion that ideologies are ‘good’ or ‘bad’, true or false, or liberating or oppressive. This is the virtue of the modern, social-scientific meaning of the term, which treats ideology as an action-orientated belief system, an interrelated set of ideas that in some way guides or inspires political action.

However, much of the debate about ideology since the mid-twentieth century has focused on predictions of its demise, or at least of its fading relevance. This came to be known as the ‘end of ideology’ debate. It was initiated in the 1950s, stimulated by the collapse of fascism at the end of World War II and the decline of communism in the developed West. In The End of Ideology (1960), the US sociologist Daniel Bell (1919–2011) declared that the stock of political ideas had been exhausted. In his view, ethical and ideological questions had become irrelevant because in most western societies parties competed for power simply by promising higher levels of economic growth and material affluence. This debate was revived in the aftermath of the collapse of communism by ‘end of history’ theorists, such as Fukuyama (see p. 271), who suggested that a single ideology, liberal democracy, had triumphed over all its rivals, and that this triumph was final (see p. 44). At the heart of such debates lies questions about the relationship between politics and ideology, and specifically about whether politics can exist without ideology (see p. 29).

### CLASSICAL IDEOLOGICAL TRADITIONS

Political ideology arose out of the transition from feudalism to industrial capitalism. In simple terms, the earliest, or ‘classical’ ideologies – liberalism, conservatism and socialism – developed as contrasting attempts to shape emerging industrial society. This meant that the central theme in ideological debate and argument during this period and beyond was the battle between two rival economic philosophies: capitalism (see p. 131) and socialism. Political ideology