

IDEAS AND IDEOLOGIES IN POLITICS

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Summary

Political ideas (known as “ideologies” when they are embedded in social or political movements) provide a framework for political action; they can be examined on their merits, as claims about what should or should not be done, and also in causal terms, as factors that influence political situations. Two powerful ideas, those of democracy and liberalism, together formed an idea of modern political organization that displaced traditional ideas of monarchical rule. Although important political theorists continue to defend the liberal-democratic settlement, it faces long-standing challenges from socialists, nationalists and critics of secularism, as well as newer challenges—both philosophical and practical—from “post-materialist” points of view. To examine contemporary political ideas and ideologies is to confront basic questions about the legitimacy of states, and, indeed, the very idea of the state.

1. Introduction

When people act in politics, they have purposes in mind, and they use means, which they believe to be legitimate. They also have beliefs about the expectations and likely reactions of others; and they often wish to explain and justify themselves to others, or else persuade them to see things differently. These beliefs about what is desirable, possible and legitimate; these shared and reciprocal understandings about political behavior; these claims that are used to justify oneself to others, or to try to change others’ minds, all these are political ideas. And evidently we will not get far, in trying to understand political situations and political institutions—or in trying to change them—without learning something about the ideas which guide and constrain action, which make coordination possible and make conflict intelligible, and which provide the substance of public debate. Often these ideas are not fully explicit, and take the form of underlying assumptions, which are all the more powerful because those who hold them are not always aware that they do so. Ideas of this kind (often termed “attitudes”) can be explored by the techniques of survey

research; comparative survey research is particularly helpful in showing how different background beliefs inform behavior in different political societies. Or, historical research can trace the ways in which basic underlying views of society and politics form and change, as the late Michel Foucault sought to do in several influential works which claim that European ideas about the nature of social order underwent a fundamental change in the age of the Enlightenment, minute and covert discipline replacing overt repression.

Sometimes, though, ideas are made explicit and are articulated and defended in a formal way and at length. As one would expect, this happens particularly in times of conflict and crisis, when the need to justify oneself to rivals and to win support for one's cause is especially acute. In response to crises, then, complex and impressive statements of political ideas—political “theories” or “philosophies”—have been developed. It is typical (though not universally true) of these theories that they should contain a general account of what political society is and what purposes or needs it serves; a definition and defense of certain basic values, such as justice, or freedom, or equality; and advocacy of a certain course of action, in general or in the circumstances of the time. Plato's *Republic* (c.380 BCE) is a particularly rich example; its political recommendations are grounded in a discussion of how and what we know, of the nature of the soul and of happiness, and of the best education, among many other things. Perhaps an even more complete example of a theory of this kind is Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651), written in response to the crisis of authority brought about by civil war in England. *Leviathan* tells us that a political society must be understood as a security-promoting device; that it can exist only when authority is absolute; that absolute authority promotes liberty, properly defined; and that one ought to obey the government that has effective power. All this is argued in a way that draws upon high standards of logic, and upon Hobbes' understanding of the most advanced knowledge of his time. But it is important to note that, for all their sophistication, theories of this kind do exactly the same as the elementary and perhaps inarticulate “political ideas” as described above: they tell us what purposes are valuable and what means are necessary; they tell us what we can reasonably expect of each other in terms of political behavior; and they appeal to us to agree to some kinds of conduct and to reject others. Plato and Hobbes are not doing something different from what the ordinary citizen does: they just do it better.

The study of political ideas has concentrated, for the most part, on the articulate and developed ideas put forward by theorists such as Plato or Hobbes. The study of these theories tends to divide into two general approaches. One is historical. Students of political ideas have tried to recover and understand the meaning of the theories of politics that have been put forward in history, from the classical period to the recent past. Increasingly, as a result of the work of historians of political thought such as Quentin Skinner, it has been accepted that the “meaning” of these works is the meaning that they would have had for contemporaries, so that to understand them is to return them as precisely as possible to their context, and to remember that, however philosophical they were in form, they were also political acts, intended to persuade people to a certain point of view. The same view has led scholars to study the “great” and philosophically interesting works in relation to the writings of lesser figures of the time, so that we can see them not as isolated statements but as part of a climate of opinion. Thus Skinner himself, for example, has shown that Hobbes' great work, despite having the appearance of a piece of timeless philosophical writing, is best understood as one of a number of commentaries on a problem that confronted English people in the early 1650s, the problem of which authority to obey—the same problem that

confronts people today, the world over, when conflicting claims are made on their loyalty by governments and by insurgent groups. This strongly reinforces the link, made above, between political ideas in their theoretical form and political ideas in the most basic sense of the term—the beliefs that underlie politics and make it what it is.

The second approach is philosophical. If we want to know the “meaning” of a political idea then we must, indeed, examine its context—just as we have to do in the case of any other statement. But we might also be interested in its truth; and then it is not enough to know what its author meant by it, we have to examine it critically in order to see if (for example) the assumptions that it makes are reasonable, if the definitions that it contains are adequate and consistent, and if the steps that it asks us to make do indeed follow from one another, and are not arbitrary. Some commentators argue for a further division here, between a political philosophy, which would examine only the logical coherence of arguments, not their realism, and “political theory”, which would also take account of whether their conclusions were politically feasible. This suggestion, however, has not (in this writer’s judgment) been followed; students of political ideas generally use the terms “theory” and “philosophy” interchangeably, and they do not all agree about whether, or at what point, feasibility is a relevant criterion for the work that they do.

So much, then, by way of introduction, for “political ideas”. What are “political ideologies”? Here there is no consensus, and a good deal of dispute. A simple definition would be this: ideologies are those political ideas which are used by social or political groups to define their purposes, set criteria for membership, and to differentiate themselves from other groups.

The “Thoughts” of Chairman Mao Zedong, as printed on the pages of the famous little red book, are simply political ideas; but when the book is waved in the hands of millions of demonstrators, its contents become ideological—they become part of a process of group-definition and exclusion. An idea, even if its author wants it to be taken up as a political cause, does not become an ideology unless or until it *is* taken up as a political cause, and functions in a process of political differentiation.

There is no answer to the question of how many people have to take it up, for how long etc., for it to become an ideology; the term is simply an imprecise one, and nothing important hinges on whether we call an idea an “ideology” or not. It is not the imprecision of the term that leads to problems, however, but the fact that some theorists build much stronger claims, of a causal kind, into it: they claim not just that an ideology is an idea with a function, but that its function explains its character and perhaps its very existence. They may further claim that *all* “ideas” are “ideologies”, that is, that they all reflect the political needs of some group or other. If that were so, of course, it would greatly change the way in which we should think about political ideas generally.

This article will now take up the three main areas of enquiry that we have just defined. First, it will outline some of the major episodes in the development of political ideas: how did the idea of a “modern” political system arise, and how has it been challenged? Second, it will comment upon some of the main issues in contemporary political philosophy, and their relation to current political questions. Third, it will discuss, briefly, “the problem of ideology”.

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Biographical Sketch

Richard Vernon is a professor of political science at the University of Western Ontario, where he teaches the history of political thought and contemporary political theory. His publications include *Citizenship and Order* (University of Toronto Press, 1986), *The Career of Toleration* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1997) and *Political Morality: A Theory of Liberal Democracy* (Continuum, 2001). His current research is in issues of international ethics.