Confronting the chimera of a ‘post-ideological’ age

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Is there nowhere for students of ideology to escape, not even when on holiday? A paragraph in a flight magazine on Iberia Airlines begins with the following popular perception: ‘At the dawn of the 21st century with ideologies in decline and a future that looks laden with pragmatism…’ The end of ideology prophets are back on the streets or, in this case, in the skies, peddling their dichotomy between thinking and doing or, more accurately, between a stifling idealism and trial-and-error expediency. So where do ideologies stand at the beginning of the 21st century, and where does their investigation stand? In what sense is this not a post-ideological age, and why could we argue that post-ideological ages are an impossibility in exactly the same way that post-political ages would be? How can we bring home the point that ideologies are not visions of alternative worlds, be they alluring or terrifying, but conceptualizations of the political worlds we already inhabit, even when critical of those worlds? And how can we sufficiently emphasize that sentient and reasoning human beings always possess a conceptualization of the political world, at whatever level of sophistication? An unideological person is simply one who has sadly passed away.

The persistence of ‘endism’ as the product of misrecognition

It seems obvious enough that we are facing an ideological turn, that something is happening to the ideologies that permeate our political habitats, and that a corresponding turn in the scholarly study of ideologies is therefore necessary. But I want to contend that this is only one way of approaching the problem. It may well be that the reverse holds, that we are experiencing a turn in analyzing ideologies that can open our eyes to what ideologies are, where we find them, and how to identify them. Throughout most of the twentieth century, we have ingested ideologies as pretty fixed and unambiguous traditions. They have come to us nicely packaged, bearing labels such as conservatism, socialism, or nationalism. Political philosophers have exacerbated this sharply defined view by modelling them as ideal types and co-opting them for philosophical purposes—that has, for instance, been the fate of
liberalism in the late 20th century, contrasted artificially and incorrectly with constructs such as communitarianism, and insultingly disempowered through pretences that it is neutral; indeed, neutered by the attempted removal of its emotional force and its value-preferences. In addition, the Marxist tradition of analyzing ideology has left a remarkable—and to some extent, pernicious—hold on scholarly imaginations. To its monolithic and cardboard cut-out perception of ideologies it has added the view that ideologies are good for one thing only—ideology-critique that will burst the balloon of hot air that has distorted our capacity to see the social world clearly. In the early stages of that tradition, to discover or uncover an ideology was the necessary step towards annihilating it. Even though later Marxist scholars came to terms with the permanence of ideology, they found it difficult to abandon its singularity. And the experience the twentieth century had with totalitarian ideologies of the right and the left has further presented ideologies as all-or-nothing systems expanding into all available personal space, while suppressing the values and practices that proper political systems should produce.

Yet the more we move away in time from the early and mid-twentieth century, the more fascism, Nazism, and Stalinist communism appear as ideological aberrations, as exceptions to the norm concerning what ideologies are. Indeed, even the above epithets don’t always pass muster when those extreme and ostensibly closed and dogmatic ideologies are subjected to more minute scrutiny, for they too evinced dissent, movement and variations. Nevertheless, it is quite common practice to refer to ‘ideologized politics’, as if non-ideological politics was either the existing norm or a far more desirable state of affairs. But perhaps the most striking fact about the way we handle contemporary ideologies is that so few academics are engaged in developing new methodologies aimed at responding to the changes that ideologies have been undergoing. There is much research into the measurement of attitudes and opinions. There is a well-established line of argument that singles out political parties or even political movements as the sole loci of ideological activity. There is
also a buoyant industry among post-Marxists who continue in the grand tradition of unmasking the illusions that ideologies foster and in spelling out the modes through which they construct our comprehensions of the world. All this is well and good, but it is by no means all of the story and perhaps not the main story. For, given that ideologies are undergoing considerable modification and adopt mutating forms, how do we identify those changes? What questions must we ask in order to elicit useful information? What are we failing to identify? How can we best relate the study of ideologies to the study of politics more generally?

To begin with, we need to brush aside two competing views. The one is that ideologies have—for the second time, oddly enough, within fifty years—ceased to be. The other is that one ideology, liberalism, has come to prevail over all others. The first, millenarian, view suffers from a weakness in the conceptualization of ideologies that causes all ideologies, except for doctrinaire and highly coherent ones, to become invisible. This of course helpfully supports the aspirations of most ideologies to attain ‘natural’ status, and thus plays into their hands. Committed ideologues should welcome the end of ideology myth—it makes their work so much easier by perpetuating an illusion under which they can continue to proselytize.

The second view suffers from a teleological perspective and from a belief in end states displayed more typically by utopias, not ideologies. If liberalism is indeed victorious, the undisputed champion of the world, then it is that rarest of things, an achieved utopia. There are two methods through which one may claim that utopias are achievable. One of them is indeed to be found within the broad family of liberalisms, but it is the province of philosophical liberalism alone. Philosophical liberals wholeheartedly believe in a rational convergence of members of a society on an agreed ethical point, which they usually consider to be coterminous with liberalism—a liberalism in which freedom, justice and fairness predominate. That convergence is a result either of deliberation or of the rational appeal to
unencumbered intuitions, in which ground rules are fixed for one and for all and removed from the political agenda.

The other genre of ‘practical’ utopianism, the Marxist, posits a contingent universalism, the consequence of the spread of a point of view, perhaps even a social truth, through space, vanquishing ideological resistance en route, until it finally conquers the globe. The apparent victory of liberalism at the end of the 20th century has, if at all, to belong to this second category of universalism through struggle (not through ‘snap your fingers’ logical necessity), for the first category does not even offer a glimmer of hope for political practitioners, describing itself as occupying a neutral political ground. A neutral political ground is a contradiction in terms. It is an area outside politics, inasmuch as politics is concerned with power, persuasion, the management of diversity, the mobilization of support, and with attempts to implement particular political visions. To be neutral towards any or all of these is an abstract form of the denial of social life. That type of utopianism is located outside space and time. As a thought-experiment it may intrigue philosophers or literary craftsmen and women. But it has nothing to do with the world of politics.

The fact is that, just as in the 1950s and 1960s, new ideological positions have emerged exactly where their impossibility has been announced, thus nullifying the case for the second kind of utopianism. The end of the Soviet Empire saw the resurrection of political ideologies that came out of a deep freeze, especially forms of nationalism of the centre and of the right. And a few years later, the continued presence of political Islam was noticed, not because it had not already existed for quite a while, but because it began to intrude on the space of that soi-disant dominant liberalism in the West, and because the revived interest in religion caused individuals to ask new questions about the relationship between religion and politics. The presence of extra-Western ideologies is still in an embryonic state of study, as is the two-way street of mutual influence between West and non-West—take for example the far-Asian mixtures of technological globalism and time-honoured localism.
The issue, however, is not simply that of the multiplication of new ideologies. The problem principally relates to ideological misrecognition, misrecognition fostered by inadequate theorizing and buttressed by the predominance of myths concerning the nature of political beliefs and what they contain. Thus, if our theories of ideology were modelled on our experiences of totalitarianism, it is unsurprising that the passing of totalitarianism was equated with the passing of ideology.\(^2\) That such a view was itself the product of a deeply-held ideological position is also beyond doubt: a world bifurcated between reason and unreason, between extremism and moderation, between freedom and oppression. It is all the more telling that this was the view of American scholars who had just emerged from a home-made mini-totalitarianism in the shape of McCarthyism.

**Liberalism as a template for identifying ideologies: from pluralism to fragmentation**

Ironically, if liberalism is now misrecognized as the dominant ideology (though one might anyhow ask, which of the many sub-sets of liberalism is dominant?), its paradoxical impact on the world of ideologies has been to reduce its own dominance. A century ago, liberalism was accused of fostering an imperialism the aim of which was to mould the world in its image, and of promoting an elitism that sought to impose hierarchies of conduct, taste and values on all cultures. Sixty years ago, however, liberalism was accused of a tolerance and a relativism that permitted extreme ideologies and their regimes to gain ascendance.\(^3\) Over the past twenty years the built-in pluralism of liberalism, its espousal of diversity, has been expressed in a predilection for multi-culturalism and the legitimization of manifold viewpoints. Because multi-culturalism reflects the liberal predilection for individual diversity, but writ large and projected on groups, its popularity as a research category proffers fertile ground for ideological analysis. For we must recall that groups, and groups alone, are the carriers of ideologies, as Marx, Mannheim and their successors knew. The structural conclusion to be derived from liberal group-pluralism seems to be a world of manifold
ideologies, one in which a permanent population of ideologies exists side by side, putting paid to Gramsci’s notion of hegemony, a very unsubtle tool already when it was coined.

I want to argue that it is the battle over liberalism, and how to interpret it, that offers clues to different ways of conceptualizing and investigating ideologies. The issue at stake is not the nature of liberalism as an ideology, but the methodological epistemology that liberalism imparts to our conceptualization of ideologies. On the surface, a creed so wedded to individualism would appear to be a poor tool through which to appreciate ideologies as social phenomena. But, again, even on that surface, liberalism has increasingly come to terms with the importance of groups and with the social nature of individuals. That aside, there are two aspects, methodologically speaking, of the impact of liberalism on current approaches to ideology.

The one aspect is that the pluralist wing of liberalism encourages choice and reassessment. As Mill already made clear, truth is temporary and its forms are constantly open to revision: ‘The beliefs which we have most warrant for have no safeguard to rest on, but a standing invitation to the whole world to prove them unfounded … if the lists are kept open, we may hope that if there be a better truth, it will be found when the human mind is capable of receiving it, and in the meantime we may rely on having attained such approach to truth as is possible in our own day.’ Translated into the terms of ideology research, that openness militates against closed conceptions of ideology claiming epistemological certainty, or theories positing the inevitability of clear-cut dominant ideologies. It also challenges the opposition between truth and ideology, at the very least by introducing a limitless trajectory of time that applies to both and that, in hermeneutical terms, offers continuously changing horizons of interpretation. A social world of ideological diversity is built into liberal individualism and pluralism; in its excessive modes individualism coalesced with atomistic conceptions of society, but even in its more moderate manifestations, individualism endorses variety—a central theme in the writings of Wilhelm von Humboldt. Variety and divergence
in their turn ensure the impermanence of human conduct and thought. In part, that was balanced and countered by a strong evolutionary current in 20th century liberal thought. The normality of individual development—riding on an enlightenment view of Bildung and of progress—was harnessed to a parallel view of social development. It assumed that the future was controllable by human reason, not random and not even multi-faceted. The evolutionary path of human and social development, though non-teleological in liberal fashion, was clearly towards greater co-operation and the application of collective, democratically controlled, intelligence. Only one optimistically-anticipated future beckoned, even if its features never attained perfection.

Mainstream 20th century liberalism, then, contributed to the legitimization of a state of affairs in which scholars as well as ordinary participants can assert that a society containing one ideology is either pathologically suppressed or ‘pre-liberal’ and ‘pre-pluralist’, whereas a society containing many ideologies is normal. That was a vital shift away from seeing a society with one ideology as pathological and a society with none as normal. However, within the liberal family a hard-fought contest has been taking place between those for whom liberalism is an ideology of humanism, of individual growth, flourishing and mutual aid, and between those—predominantly in the USA and in some Eastern European countries—for whom liberalism is an ideology of capitalist free enterprise. The second view of liberalism is of course eagerly adopted by its detractors as well: after all, it makes it much easier to present liberalism in an unsympathetic light and it minimizes the overlap humanist liberalism displays with other progressive ideologies.

Here is the second aspect of the impact of applying liberalism, loosely defined, to conceptualizing ideologies. Recent self-proclaimed proponents of liberalism have eroded the thicker 20th century mainstream notions of liberalism. They have done so by conceptually redefining the adjacent liberal concept of choice and reducing it to acts undertaken by maximizing consumers rather than to acts undertaken by reflective reasoners. Ostensibly, that
option had been available in the liberal arsenal for a very long time, but what is new is that those models of choice are fashioned through not through emulating the exploits of entrepreneurs and captains of industry equipped with a vision and sense of purpose, but through popular experiences of supermarket consumption patterns. As a consequence they have contributed significantly to the ephemerality and unpredictability of our awareness of our own choices. They have also invited us to use our shopping trolleys to mix and match, to employ—on a more positive note—our imaginations to create new combinations out of existing materials and—on a less positive note—other people’s imaginations to accomplish the very same. All this has resulted in a mottled landscape of colours and shapes in which the future is less ‘knowable’. Pluralism is thus converted into fragmentation, and fragmentation leads to increased indeterminacy. The old enlightenment assumption that a holistic harmony will hold variety together is by now hardly available to students of politics.

In other words, the hidden potential of ideological contestability—conventionally overridden by the tendency of ideologies to impose certainty on political language through decontesting devices—is now becoming more evident in political discourse. There are of course occasional lapses into the language of assurance—one of which occurred just before the millennium, which provided its own short-lived iconography of an inviting and exciting future—but experimentation and fluidity are once again the order of the day. European polities, for instance, have been experimenting with countless versions of ‘safe’ or ‘respectable’ nationalism and populism, with the integration of green perspectives into former mainstream ideological positions, and with public-private enterprises that endeavour to recreate the balance between welfare and efficiency that has been at the centre of social-democratic domestic politics for much of this century.

Put in these terms, liberalism can be costly in terms of the attributes of ideology. Some of the main features of an ideology are to mobilize support for political decisions and systems, as well as to map the political world in a clear and communicable manner. In its
more clouded moments, however, liberalism can encourage sitting on fences, uncertainty, unreflective spontaneity, or a whole range of equally plausible solutions. The legitimization of policies then becomes rather more complex. While political philosophers, especially but not exclusively of the Anglo-American variety, wish to see the burden of understanding and of choice transferred to the reflective and participatory individual, that burden is one that many people do not wish to take on, and cannot shoulder. The alternative is to bow to the numerical and power preponderance of certain groups or even, more amorphously, of certain fashions. Then the problem of competing understandings becomes inescapable, and the relativization of truths—the very issue on which liberalism has been frequently berated—re-emerges.

These conceptual indeterminacies are of course the normal properties of ideologies, because of the essential and the effective contestability on which conceptual meaning is grounded, but that does signal the impermanence as well as the non-doctrinaire nature of much contemporary political thinking. And when reflective choice is conflated with market choice, and ideologies are seen as political goods with little intrinsic and much instrumental worth, the fragility of their existence appears to become even more salient.

Fragmentation and the slackening of political and cultural constraints

Fragmentation, however, is not merely the consequence of flippant consumerism. Another of its causes lies in the fact that mass democratization, as Gramsci already pointed out, brought about a change in the social distribution of ideological producers. Intellectual elites began to relinquish control over a relatively tight ideological structure, and ‘grass-roots’ ideologies, though existent in the past, found new ways of influencing the map of mainstream, state-recognized, ideological positions. This has a number of facets. First, the mass media—those crucial disseminators of ideology—have become far more oriented towards so-called mass political cultures, both reflecting and shaping commonly held views,
and often exploiting the marginalization of some groups in order to sell newspapers with populist and nationalist prejudices. Of course, the media monopolies work against rather than with democratization, but equally, monopoly liberalism is that version of liberalism the furthest removed from democracy and one of the principal targets of humanist liberalism. Second, political activism has been more keenly reflected in the ideological positions that became publicly salient, and the evanescence of many such activist movements has quickened the pace of perceived ideological change. Thus, the form in which ideologies are now most likely to be noticed in the West is that of the new, and not so new, social movements, specifically targeted programmatically in the fashion of pressure groups, and often cobbled together from an eclectic range of beliefs. Third, the dumbing down of political language has both disguised ideologies—hitherto marketed in terms more familiar to the elitist language of political theory or the high culture of the serious weeklies—and has enriched the linguistic and communicative forms in which they appear. Ideologies are increasingly presented in ‘fast-food’ easily consumable format, with a very limited shelf-life, once again reinforcing the loose mix and match configurations of ideas that many ideologies have adopted, but this time not on the grounds of economic consumption but of relative linguistic lawlessness.

All this means that the ideological field, at present, is particularly challenging to the researcher. Some of it appears in old clothing: types of conservatism, of nationalism, of aggressive populism have been around for a while in recognizable forms. Socialism has shrunk and is seriously ill, so we are told, though social democratic ideologies have survived by opening their boundaries to the kind of economic and managerial content that would have been decisively and derisively excluded a couple of decades ago. Moreover, it would be premature to predict the demise of socialism, as its conceptual frameworks satisfy political and ideological needs—concerning redistribution, the recognition of human identity, and the group nature of human organization—that will simply not wither away. Witness the current
resurrection of some of the social democratic forms in France and in Spain, however local the circumstances may be. On the other hand, what I have elsewhere termed ‘thin’ ideologies—ideologies that lack a comprehensive set of plans for political action⁹—seem to be thriving, perhaps another facet of the intellectual simplification and more modest and impatient features of contemporary ideologies.

The notion of a ‘post-ideological’ age is itself a masking device—a screen constructed by those who are intent on waving goodbye to macro-ideologies that might attain a life of their own and thus threaten agency-rich conceptions of human initiative and control; by those who wish stealthily to move into that ostensible vacuum in order to set up their own anti-utopian—yet at the same time unattainable—vision of hegemony; as well as by those who still adhere to a strong anti-intellectualism in which ideas are marginal epiphenomena. Perhaps we just aren’t looking carefully enough; perhaps we aren’t tuned in to observing the fleeting and fragile manifestations of current ideologies; perhaps, even, their ephemerality reflects a confused and anxious flight from the traditionally constraining patterns of language and custom, at least on the surface. While ideologies possess the crucial function of decontesting essentially contested meanings, that feature is always a struggle against linguistic indeterminacy that can only temporarily succeed. Battles may be won, but the war for assigning precise meaning to political language is doomed to be lost, much as ideologies loudly proclaim the opposite, and much as politics—with its urgent need to make decisions—cannot take place unless some of those individual battles are victorious.

For ideologies exist in an elaborate relationship with time. The tendency of textbooks on ideology to present them as static articles of belief and as stable compounds mirrors almost exactly, if unintentionally, the abstract ahistoricity of philosophical models. On the other hand, we cannot go along entirely with the hermeneutic view of the ‘authorless text’ subject to boundless readings by individual readers. One of the most intriguing aspects of ideology as ‘text’ is that it is constantly being re-written, not just reread, because its
producers inherit that creative task from generation to generation, even from month to month, as the life span of ideology-formulating groups extends beyond that of their individual members. Even when we do factor time into the equation, the inclination is to see time as disruptive, as a challenge to the quiescence, the harmony and the balance ideal-type politics is supposed to engender.

But what if we were to conceive of ideological change, dynamics and malleability as normal, and ideological stasis as an anomalous blip in modern societies that are continuously subject to continuous rapid transformation—a blip caused perhaps by totalitarian control over time, or a product of inadequate observation and analysis on the part of the scholar? The school of conceptual history has focused to some extent on paradigmatic shifts, on what Koselleck has termed a *Sattelzeit*. Although such sudden shifts have occurred from time to time, those grand events cannot come to terms with the everyday fluidity of ideological morphology. Here Wittgenstein’s analogy with a thread comes in handy, for it can draw attention to the unceasing microchanges that ideologies undergo, and the parallel requirement for ideology scholarship to develop micro-tools to detect them. Indeed, we are far too bedazzled by the grandness of some ideological edifices to notice the mundanity of most others. And while mundane does not make the headlines, it is the very substance of political analysis. For most of the time we experience the ordinary, and it is the ordinary ideological maps that, because of their low visibility, require particular awareness and decoding.

On the other hand, fragmentation exists only potentially within the world of ideologies. The patterns are there, even if we need to increase our shutter speed to capture them. Change is never entirely random. The world of ideologies is less centrifugal than the presence of fragmentation may allow because of the patterns that ideologies adopt, and because, on closer inspection, what we often get are offshoots of past and existing ideational configurations, adapted deliberately or, more often, unconsciously to new contingencies, new theories and new fashions. And while the multiplicity of ideologies might suggest
fragmentation, each ideology on its own is a necessary attempt at the stabilization of a fluid set of relationships among political concepts and ideas. The world of ideologies is both a continual series of challenges to the inertia of established ideological macro-families and, conversely, an endeavour to curb artificially the relentless process of amorphous change that political ideas undergo. And when boundaries are very much on the political agenda once again: boundaries against mass migration to Europe, boundaries against the spread of terror and its political hosts, boundaries against the economic instability brought about by the very success of the welfare state with its concomitant climate of citizens’ high expectations—ideological systems relapse into oversimplifications such as the ‘clash of civilizations’ or the ‘third way’ and retreat into their own boundaries, however transient.

If liberalism encourages ideological pluralism—and was condemned precisely for that by post-world war II political philosophers seeking new and unshakeable foundations for liberal theory—the retreat from socialism, let alone communism, has encouraged a backlash against ideology itself. Here it is precisely the inevitable group nature of ideology that is the problem. For if theories such as socialism in which groups play central roles are in the decline at the expense of burgeoning new forms of private entrepreneurship and of the resurrection of leadership and ‘steering’ roles in politics, it is not surprising that their accompanying epistemology in which group products are salient withers away as well. Nevertheless, ideologies are, and will continue to be, created by groups. As social scientists we cannot be taken in by extreme individualism and close our eyes to the patterned interaction of human beings; nor can we assume that such group conduct must always tend towards unstable and extreme manifestations as in current forms of populism and anarchism. We need to re-identify the groups from which ideologies emerge and that serve to sustain them.

In pursuit of ideologies and how to behave when we find them
Preparing conceptual and research agenda for the scholarly study of ideology, and of concrete ideologies, may involve a number of moves. First, we need to jettison the anthropomorphization of groups, as if they had a homogeneous structure, let alone a fixed personality, that is amenable to the formation of dogma. We could take a couple of leaves out of Dahl’s and Lipset’s pioneering work between the 1950s and 1970s, in which groups underwent continuous processes of recombination, and in which social relationships were fluctuating and re-aggregated. So if groups—the producers and carriers of ideology—mutate constantly, it may be assumed that their ideational creations will do likewise, and that ideological aggregations within a society will be open to frequent reconfiguration. That has some significant consequences for contemporary political thought. In particular, the recent popularization of Carl Schmitt’s distinction between friend and enemy, also proffered by postmodernists as the notion of the ‘Other’, relies precisely on the kind of stark dichotomization that more sophisticated theories eschew. While that dichotomization may be vaguely true of elementary nationalism as well, one of the central features of conservatism, to the contrary, is to be found in the construction of multiple ‘others’ against which the conservative profile reacts in mirror-image style. Conservative ideology hence contains a range of substantive conceptual arrangements united loosely in a specific grammar of reaction.

Second, the process of cultural decentralization opens up various loci of ideological production. These existed before, but social sensitivity towards them meant that they were overlooked or trivialized. Now, however, increased efficiency of communication, more widespread education, as well as the attention paid to local cultures, present ideologies in complex societies as actual competitions over the public ear and eye, even if not all contestants are able to claim equal significance. Instead of up-down structures, horizontal sites can make themselves heard through the power of the purse, through iconic cultural status, through diligent campaigning, or through the news-value of the unusual or the bizarre.
Third, ideologies are undergoing a process of de-territorialization. I prefer that term to ‘globalization’ not only because there exist competing forms of globalizing but because it pinpoints one of the more important features of contemporary ideologies: they have become detached from the contexts in which they originally made sense. While globalization is often seen as a manifestation of the power of the globalizing agents, ideological de-territorialization represents a weakening of structural and conceptual stability. The familiar is normally stronger than the removed, particularly because the distance between the intentions of the producers and the understandings of the consumers is more easily bridgeable. It may be the case that ideologies now appear to travel easily and lightly. Yet seemingly similar patterns across space turn out on inspection to be something entirely different. Conventional labels such as liberal, conservative and even fascist have been casualties of dilution, confusion and misappropriation. In extreme cases, they do not operate as signifiers for an ideology at all, but merely as name-tags to arouse a single association and knee-jerk responses, as do sound-bites. In a re-run of 1950s millenarianism, a new kind of end of ideology appears to be back, in that all we appear to hear about are artificially manufactured responses to focus-group concerns that are as ephemeral as yesterday’s newspaper. That appearance is of course misleading. But in a broader sense de-territorialization increases the variety of members of a particular ideological family often to stretching point; the question is whether some of those members are usurpers or bringing a new gene pool to the family. And a related question is, if there still are local ideologies, what are the features that distinguish them as local?

Fourth, after a period of increasing democratization, at least on the superficial level of mass adoption and mass support, ideologies seem to be undergoing a process of contraction in support, of ‘de-massification’. Even recent ‘populisms’ may need to have their popularity carefully scrutinized. In part this contraction is related to the revulsion in the West against totalizing ideologies; in part to the alternative cultural claims on members of affluent
societies at the expense of political involvement, be those religious or, more likely, connected to the world of entertainment; in part to the current decline in ‘inspirational’ ideologies that offer clear visions of the future—itself due to a disillusionment with the promise of future trajectories. But, mainly, ideologies have become subject to marketing rules in a novel manner. In the past it was assumed that ideologies were just there, as part of the political landscape. Conservative ideologies in particular were seen as natural growths, but even progressive ideologies were regarded as the products and reflections of evolving social forces that either developed as a facet of human rationality or were subject to deterministic laws. Now the Weberian notion of disenchantment needs to be applied to ideologies as well. The impact of advertising raises the possibility that one can construct, market and even purchase an ideology. Ideologies thus become instrumental to the service of short-term political and economic ends, not general belief systems to which the world of politics has to adapt. And once ideologies are seen as manufactured artificially, we may not be far away from the development of designer ideologies, available on tap through specialist think-tanks ready to cater to a range of political situations that require immediate ideological underpinning.

Curiously enough, a similar conclusion can be drawn from post-structuralist theory in its insistence on the social construction of beliefs, but only to the extent that it is prepared to entertain a salient role for human agency and the possibility of deliberately fashioned ideologies, a role that in many of its manifestations it is reluctant to adopt. But all this does not mean that as analysts of ideology we must conclude that all meanings and constructions are equally valid. An olive branch may be held out to political philosophers and ethicists by showing them that cultural validations can be more carefully assessed once we know what fields of meaning and of value the various conceptual configurations—of which ideologies are constituted—can produce. We need to know what our purchases will look like when we bring them back home and how to avoid tripping over them.
The fragility of particular ideological arrangements must not be confused with the fragility of ideology in general. The de-dogmatizing of ideologies is a de facto recognition of their internal malleability, and a means of protecting them from the breakable brittleness of more rigid ideological structures. Ideologies that adapt to the natural suppleness of language and meaning, while maintaining some continuity as well as a principled vision that can inspire support, are far more likely to flourish in cultures not based on mass movements or on hierarchically maintained belief systems. By contrast, in cultures where mass conduct is strongly regulated through cultural and religious norms, ideologies based on traditional mores and repetitive views of history will be internalized with little reflection.

This raises the issue of the boundaries between a political ideology and other cultural belief systems. One of the most significant features of Western ideologies is their differentiation from other belief systems. This aspect of intellectual division of labour has seen the emergence of a set of thought practices specifically aimed at the mobilization of political support and at control over public decision-making. Of course, ideologies are only quasi-autonomous in that respect, and will rely heavily on cultural constructs, fashions and conventions that have resonance in other spheres—the physical imagery of a country, the habits of interaction, milestones of history, quirks of personality, iconic landmarks of literature. But they have partly disentangled themselves from religious faiths, from myths and from social and psychological dispositions. The recent rise of the political salience of religion challenges that quasi-autonomy. This leads, among others, to the difficulty of dealing with ostensible hybrids such as political Islam—itself subject in the West to the kind of undiscerning monolithic treatment that is nourished on older, doctrinaire, conceptions of ideology. Although it is clear that different versions of political Islam display variable degrees of undergirding by religious precepts, the type of questions still asked, for instance ‘is there an Islamic economics?’ demand comparison with European phenomena such as Christian democracy as well as with non-European phenomena such as American neo-
conservatism, precisely in order to ascertain the level of differentiation of their pool of ideas and signifiers from religious discursive patterns.

So how and where do we find ideologies in the 21st century? Here again some confusion reigns. Historians may write about the ideology of beer-brewing when they really mean the ideas that a particular practice incorporates. Not every set of ideas is an ideology, though it may be a segment of one. Political scientists frequently refer to over-ideologized politics, when they mean to indicate that a set of political aims and justifications has become detached from the policies and activities undertaken under its aegis. Post-structuralists point to specific ways of articulating perceptions of reality as being at the heart of the ideological domain, but their focus is on perception and misperception and on the critique of illusions and their formation. More complicated is what counts as an ideological statement or text. Discourse analysis permits any sentence to be regarded as a carrier of ideological import. That is generally plausible, though discourse and ideology are not one and the same thing. Discourse is both broader than ideology—any communicative act counts as discourse, not only those with significant political content—and narrower than ideology, because its analysis underplays the social and historical contexts in which language is used and the special role that political concepts play in ideological structure.

However, since words in the field of ideology are the signifiers of political concepts, the slippage of meanings, deliberate or unintentional, that a word carries may serve as a highly significant indicator of a broader ideological shift. When John Major, then British PM, introduced the notion of a citizens’ charter to refer to meagre financial compensation for individuals when public services failed them, he was capitalizing on the political gravitas of the two words, with their foundational constitutional implication. Effectively, however, citizens were transformed through this ‘charter’ into clients or customers, and the state into a provider. The ‘contract’ between the state and its citizens had been commercialized. Word combinations may also accrue meaning through historically contingent circumstances. The
phrase ‘national socialism’ can no longer be co-opted as an indication of a sub-species of socialism—its ‘innocence’ has been irredeemably corrupted—although it would be less cumbersome than Stalin’s ‘socialism in one country’. Certain words, as cultural historians and anthropologists know, burn out and have to be substituted. If according to Althusser naming (interpellation) is a defining feature of ideology, so is re-naming. The admixture of linguistic and conceptual indeterminacy ensures that the naming game is something analysts of ideology will always have to master.

Many containers of ideological subject-matter offer ideologies a deliberate or unintentional free ride through the internet, television, the cinema, posters, logos, and public spectacles such as military marches, celebrations of independence or labour days. Some of these are new, some well-established, but they all reflect the increasing awareness we have of non-verbalized ideological dissemination, for which discourse analysis is, again, inadequate. A host of cultural artefacts now serves as conveyors of multiple messages, some of which are plainly ideological, in the sense of rallying support for, or opposition to, areas of public policy. But are slogans ideologies? Are catch-phrases or logos sufficiently intricate to attract out attention as analysts of ideology? Of course they are, and in two senses—as pocket-maps for people in a hurry, who only need the main street through town; and as a fast mobilizer of political support from citizens, who otherwise would ignore deliberately targeted ideological messages. On the other hand, these snippets cannot live up to the general function of a political ideology as a vehicle through which complex public policy is shaped. Traffic lights may signify the authority of the state in regulating public conduct, and a Coca Cola sign may symbolize the global economic reach of the giant multinationals, but they are just tiny windows into intricate and interwoven social practices and the ideological understandings they contain. We cannot just go away and say smugly, with our prejudices comfortably reinforced, in the first case, ‘the state is all-powerful!’, and in the second case ‘capitalism reigns supreme!’.
important clues but no substitute for the detail and complexity of ideological maps that advanced societies need in order to navigate. The big packages will not become redundant because in highly-differentiated societies the human imagination requires a vast pool of interpretative and policy options.

Another issue that deserves careful treatment is the confusion between an ideological system and certain historical themes in political thought. One example of this is republicanism—a topic that contemporary political philosophers in conjunction with early modern historians have identified as permeating a range of political positions. For some, this is a significant point in the tradition of political thinking when civic liberty and a civic spirit were formed and embodied embryonic notions of public participation and accountability. But republicanism is not easily comprehended as an ideology. It is a set of conceptions and dispositions that was not perceived as a coherent, let alone collectively-held, set of political beliefs. At best, it intersected with what could be seen as ideologies, that is, with languages competing over the control of public policy, languages such as liberalism, nationalism and quasi-socialist discourse. At worst, it is a post-factum academic construct, a paradigmatic aid intended to tease out seminal changes in public behaviour unknown to, or barely surmised by, their practitioners.

But then, how do we distinguish between the social constructs and discoveries that we as scholars produce or unearth and ideologies as popular social self-understandings? Sometimes a re-reading and re-labelling can turn out to be instructive. Unlike republicanism, welfarism may be such an instance. The early twentieth-century development of welfare state thinking has been the site of attempts at appropriation both by socialist and by liberal ideologies. It is however much more instructive to see it as occupying a space that overlaps with both the traditional ideologies but that shares insufficient features with either. The possessiveness of political parties over a major policy field (was the welfare state the
achievement of Liberals, Labour, or Social-Democrats?) has distorted the emergence of a new point of view, a new set of ideological beliefs. Those were consciously held by large groups of people who were to some extent misled by the paucity of available conceptual frameworks with which to appreciate what they were doing. But the ideology of the welfare state was nameless at the time, and retrospectively recognizing it and naming it can make sense of a real-world ideology.

All this is part of the excitement of working with ideologies. The subject-matter at our disposal offers virtually infinite possibilities for research and analysis. Thus, for example, the micro-analysis of ideologies permits both strong comparative juxtapositions and allows the analyst to explore conceptual aggregations and configurations at any level of magnification. That means that we can either adopt existing and conventional ideological structures or families and subject them to investigative scrutiny, or decide on larger, smaller and cross-cutting constellations, as befits our research purposes. The experimentation here is not only that of the ideological innovator but that of the researcher who chooses on which morphological sample to focus, a decision that itself produces new insights. That is the critical study of ideology in the non-Marxist sense of ideology-critique: the ability to use the investigation of ideology as a critical tool for interpreting institutions, practices and social thought-patterns all at once. And more traditional macro-analysis needs to continue inasmuch as individuals’ perceptions of ideological wholes such as liberalism or fascism—however simplified those labels may be—play a vital part in accounting for their conduct; and inasmuch as ideological wholes share a host of functions such as legitimization or social integration/alienation. Students of ideology should not be too quick to abandon research into the conventional ideological macro-families just because some new ones are grabbing the headlines.

Crucially, studying ideology cannot be disentangled from studying politics: ideologies are not optional extras or ‘externalities’ but rather the codes that organize all political
practices—the DNA of praxis. Moreover, ideologies are both socially inherited and malleable—to push the analogy further, they may be genetically modified, for good or for evil, to improve current practices or enable new ones. Ultimately, the analysis of ideologies has to be brought back to the very mainstream of politics. How that could ever have been otherwise now seems incomprehensible.

2 Thus the standard views of analysts such as D. Bell, *The End of Ideology* (1962).


10 The monumental work presenting the 19th century as such a bridging period is the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, eds. O. Brunner, W. Conze and R. Koselleck, 8vols. (Stuttgart, 1972-1996).


