HEGEMONY AND CONTESTATION IN POST-IDEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

John Schwarzmantel
POLIS
University of Leeds
Leeds LS2 9JT
j.j.schwarzmantel@leeds.ac.uk

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This paper sets itself some ambitious aims. First, it seeks to investigate whether the notion of ideological hegemony has any applicability or relevance to contemporary society. Secondly, the purpose is to sketch out what might be the features appropriate to a new counter-ideology, by which I mean an ideology of opposition and critique which satisfies a number of criteria. These criteria include relevance to the real conditions of contemporary politics, a capacity to inspire and mobilise which is necessary for any political ideology, and finally the avoidance of the dogmatism and monolithic characteristics which have characterised ideological politics in the past, culminating in totalitarian forms of such a style of politics.

Here then is the plan for this paper: I wish first to pick out two apparently contrasting features of the contemporary ideological scene. On the one hand, it seems that the notion of ideological hegemony is highly relevant to present-day politics, and that it is liberalism which is the dominant ideology. Contrasted with this position would be a different line of analysis which rejects the notion of ideological hegemony completely. If this latter perspective is correct, then present-day society (at least in developed liberal-democracies, and it is with the role of ideology in these societies that this paper is concerned) is one free from the hold of any ideology. We are living in a post-ideological society in which the concept of ideology, and a fortiori a dominant or hegemonic one, has no place. The appeal of ideology has been replaced by the politics of identity, of personal values which have nothing in common with the
politics of ideology which have dominated earlier (less fortunate) times. On this view the whole shape of political life has been transformed, since new issues have arisen which cannot be handled in the framework of ideological politics.

Let me start with this second view, expounding it before trying to show why it is wrong. This view rests on a distinction between an ideological society and a non-ideological or post-ideological society. In the former, politics is dominated by the search for an overall societal goal, the aspiration to realise or actualise a particular conception of the good society. An ideological society is one where one dominant view of the good life is diffused through society and moulds people’s consciousness. This process of course can take different forms, ranging from the totalitarian ideological societies of fascism and Stalinist communism to more liberal, though still ideological, societies where notions of ideological hegemony would still be appropriate.

In contemporary society, on this line of argument, the issues of political debate can no longer be fixed within the parameters of any single ideology. Society has changed, so that it has become liberated from such a monolithic framework. If identity, whether of a personal or group nature, is the basis for politics, then the broad frameworks of ideological politics are simply irrelevant to the sources of political action. There is an opposition between the politics of identity and the politics of ideology: the former seeks in political action a space for the recognition of the particular interests and goals of the individual, or cultural group. Ideological politics, by contrast, finds expression in a much more collective style of public action. The terrain of ideological politics is that of parties, or broad social movements oriented towards a project of total social transformation. However, on this line of analysis, modern political life is no longer like that, but operates on a much more fragmented or piecemeal basis: particular groups struggling for recognition, special interests demanding that governments respond to their demands, these exemplify the shape of politics in the contemporary world which is anything but ideological.

It is easy to see why such a view has gained credence: the obvious fact of the dangers of ideological politics in their totalitarian form leads to an opposed reaction which welcomes the politics of difference and diversity. If ideologies lead to the annihilation
of pluralism, then a healthy and diverse society will be incompatible with the procrustean bed of ideologies which seek to ‘steer’ such diversity in the direction of one ideal. Ideologies elevate one ideal of a good society, and attempt to orientate or direct different aspects of life towards one goal. An ideological movement is a collective movement, which arouses people’s loyalty, plays on their emotions through the use of myth and symbol, and seeks to capture state power to impose that goal on the whole of society. That such movements are not recognisable entities in contemporary society shows that we have moved to a different kind of society which can be called post-ideological.

I wish to argue against this view, which I think rests on too crude a view of ideology. I wish instead to use some of Gramsci’s ideas on ideology to support the idea of liberalism as the dominant ideology in contemporary society, and to develop some ideas of what could form a counter-ideology, and why this is needed in the conditions of present-day politics. For Gramsci, ideology was essentially a practical force, based on a popularisation or vulgarisation of philosophy developed by intellectuals. As he wrote, ideologies constituted the mass aspect of any philosophical conception: 

Ideologies are the true philosophy because they result from the philosophical vulgarisations which bring the masses to concrete action, to the transformation of reality (Gramsci, QC p.1242).

Thus ideologies percolate or disseminate the thoughts of the philosophers down to the masses, making them not only accessible but stimulating action. In another place, and in similar vein, Gramsci writes of ideology as ‘an intermediary phase between philosophy and daily practice’ (Gramsci, QC, p.1433). Following these insights, one could thus say that liberalism is hegemonic as an ideology, because it percolates down to the masses in a vulgarised form, and animates people’s actions in ways which they might not be aware of themselves.

My argument is that liberalism is hegemonic in contemporary liberal-democratic societies, but this supposed triumph of liberalism needs to be qualified in a number of ways. First, the dominance of liberalism as ideology has been purchased at the expense of its theoretical sophistication and intellectual depth. If Gramsci is right and ideologies ‘result from the philosophical vulgarisations which bring the masses to concrete action’, then the practical effectiveness of liberalism is made possible
because liberalism has been diluted and simplified. What passes for liberalism is a rather crude ideology of individual choice, individual rights and an uncritical view of what one author calls ‘market-driven politics’ (Leys, 2001). I make two points about the terms on which liberalism has been able to establish itself as hegemonic. First what is lost in this victory is that aspect of liberalism which appeals to ideas of self-development, of the transformation of the self through interaction with others, a process which is assisted (as J.S. Mill suggests) by political participation, for example in local government. This self-developmental aspect of liberalism, further developed by ‘New Liberals’ like T.H. Green, has been submerged in the ideology of liberalism which is presented and diffused as the ideology of consumer supremacy and choice. In this vulgar liberalism, if it can be called that, ideas of free choice in the market place and the untrammelled power of the market are given pride of place. This overlooks some central dilemmas of classical liberalism concerning the possible swamping of individualism and diversity by a mass society, classically expressed by de Tocqueville. Indeed his warnings about the focus on individual pleasures and self-interest, leading to a neglect of the public domain and even to the growth of a ‘soft despotism’ in a depoliticised society seem more relevant now than ever.

Thus I agree with Gaus that the dominance of liberalism as an ideology has been achieved at the cost of its dilution, if not disappearance, as a philosophy (Gaus, 2000). I would prefer to put it in these terms, that liberalism as a critical ideology has in its vulgarised ‘ideological’ form lost that critical edge, and abandoned its vision of a society of fully self-determining individuals. If Bauman is right to say that ‘all ideologies, including the most conservative among them, were sharp edges pressed against the reality as it happened to exist at the time’ (Bauman, 1999, p.124), then liberalism has now lost its ‘sharp edge’. It has abandoned its critical function and exists in a much more depoliticised form. As an example of this I would point to Rawls’ Political Liberalism, where liberalism appears as the search for political consensus, which is achieved by giving up any agreement on a ‘comprehensive doctrine’ (Rawls, 1993). The Rawlsian version of liberalism is a rather thin liberalism which accepts ‘reasonable difference’ with respect to doctrines of the good life, but offers little more in the way of substantive doctrine. If that is where liberalism is now, as an ideology, then it would seem to exemplify what Bauman describes as ‘an
ideology without a project’, which is in his opinion an oxymoron, or contradiction in terms.

The second aspect of liberalism and the status and nature of its contemporary hegemony, is its depoliticised nature. It seems to me that this reflects one aspect of liberalism, its protection of the private sphere from political (and majority) encroachments. Liberalism (I claim) has won out as an ideology, an ideology which sees fulfilment above all as lying in the private sphere. As Benjamin Constant noted in his famous lecture on the liberty of the ancients and that of the moderns, ‘our freedom must consist of peaceful enjoyment and private independence’ (Constant, 1988, p.316). My argument is while this is by no means the only face or aspect of liberal freedom, it is the one highlighted in liberalism as a contemporary, and dominant, ideology. The more perceptive liberals, including in this Constant himself, as well as Tocqueville, were aware of the potential dangers of this ‘peaceful enjoyment and private independence’, when taken to excess. It could (paradoxically) lead to the undermining of both freedom and self-development, if individuals shut themselves up in the private sphere and neglected civic involvement and the chances for character improvement which such participation provided. But the dominance of contemporary liberalism as ideology has given liberalism a strong push towards attitudes valorising the private sphere, primarily that of consumption, and maintaining a detached, and even cynical, attitude to public spheres of political activity.

In this connection there is one phenomenon which functions as both cause and effect. Ideologies are both intellectual structures, combinations of ideas and concepts, and at the same time they are also practical political forces, which stimulate political parties and provide the mobilising ideas for parties and movements. In terms of practical politics within contemporary liberal-democratic system, the ideological spectrum has narrowed. Parties competing for political power appeal to a relatively limited range of ideas in the centre of the left-right spectrum, and this reinforces the hegemony of liberalism. If liberalism is a doctrine of the centre, with an impressive ability to absorb critical ideologies of both left and right, then it benefits from the shift to the centre ground of politics, practised by political leaders in their search for electoral support. Yet it is precisely this absorptive capacity of liberalism, the ease with which it can, in its present form, be ‘all things to all people’, that causes it to be the main ideological
pivot for contemporary political struggle. This does not denote agreement with Giddens’ view that we are ‘beyond Left and Right’, but Giddens seems to be correct in some respects. Traditional conservatism is not a strong contender in a reflexive and hence anti-traditional society. The same is true of statist socialism in the period following the collapse of the USSR, which has discredited what Giddens calls the cybernetic model of socialism, a dirigiste planned economy controlled by an all-powerful central ‘brain’ (Giddens, 1994). So what then is left, as ideological planks on which parties in liberal-democratic system base their appeal? The answer is various versions of liberalism in its watered down ‘ideological’ form, which does not impose very strict ideological components and allows a high degree of choice by individuals, or what appears to be choice.

What has been the argument so far? We are not living in a post-ideological society, but in one where there is a dominant ideology of liberalism, which is diffused through a variety of channels in a vulgarised form. This hegemonic form of liberalism has deprived liberalism, not of its status as an ideology, but rather of its cutting-edge critical perspective. If Gramsci is right to point out the role of ideology as necessarily being a vulgarisation of sophisticated philosophies, then this is confirmed by the present-day situation. Liberalism has lost out as a critical philosophy and triumphed as a contemporary ‘common sense’. It has in part been able to do this because it has absorbed the critique of other historically influential ideologies, at times taking on board a dose of social-democracy to reduce the harshness of classic liberalism of the Manchester school. By the same token, those ideologies critical of liberalism, like conservatism, have entered on liberal terrain by abandoning or downplaying their own distinctive traditions and by accepting this ‘common sense liberalism’ with its emphasis on the market, competition, freedom of individual choice and the scepticism towards the public sphere. The same embrace of this common-sense liberalism characterises much of contemporary social-democracy, I would suggest, especially in its ‘third-way’ manifestations. So the picture I wish to present of the contemporary ideological scene is not one of a post-ideological society, but one which presents itself as such, falsely. Contemporary liberal-democracy is an ideological society, where a particular version of liberalism prevails, in crude fashion. Other formerly more critical ideologies have adapted themselves to this vulgarised liberalism, which has been able to present itself as an ideology of freedom, choice, diversity, and thus capture if not
public enthusiasm then at least acceptance as ‘the only game in town’. This then gives rise to a very impoverished spectrum of ideological and political debate, which perhaps becomes self-reinforcing. Because the range of political ideologies on offer has become narrow in range, this reduces the interest and attraction of politics and the public sphere. In turn this reinforces the concentration on, in Constant’s phrase, ‘peaceful enjoyment and private independence’ which is what the dominant ideology itself highlights.

What then are the implications of this for ‘working with ideology in a post-ideological age’? I hope to have shown that the notion of a post-ideological age is itself a fallacy, and that the dominant ideology (vulgarised liberalism) works in part by seeking to discredit all rival ideologies as dangerous visions which can only lead to a totalitarian form of politics. So if the present society is one which only on the surface is, or appears to be, post-ideological, my focus in the rest of this paper is on what might be done to revivify the ideological scene, to restore vitality to ideological politics without going down the path of monolithic or totalitarian ideologies forced or imposed on all aspects of life. My argument, in a nutshell, is that working with ideology in a (supposedly, but not really) post-ideological society requires the development of a new ideology, a counter-ideology, which avoids two dangers. The first danger is of being a rigid straitjacket which prevents creative politics by imposing dogmatic schemata and simplistic formulae instead of open thinking. The second danger is the Scylla to the just-mentioned Charybdis, and that is having no vision, no overall goal or inspiring project, the above-mentioned oxymoron taken from Bauman of an ideology without a project. As indicated earlier, if my argument is right this is the position arrived at in contemporary politics. So my argument is to establish the need for a counter-ideology which avoids these two dangers. ‘Working with ideology in a post-ideological age’ would entail the formation and development of new forms of ideological politics, and this is what I wish to sketch out in what follows.

Here too one can take some hints from Gramsci, using his ideas as a point of departure. Gramsci’s ongoing debate with Croce was presented by him as a conflict between two ideologies, or Weltanschaunungen, liberalism and Marxism. Gramsci sees Croce as the most important representative of liberalism, its most sophisticated exponent in the contemporary world. According to Gramsci, there is a difference
between the ‘ideological front’ and the military ‘front’, in the battle for hegemony. In
the latter one should attack at the enemy’s weakest point, but the same is not true for
intellectual struggle. In that field one should always take as the point of critique the
outstanding champions of the opposed ideology, since victory over its minor
representatives would be of no value, and peter out in petty polemics:

On the ideological front, however, the defeat of the auxiliaries and the minor hangers-
on is of all but negligible importance. Here it is necessary to engage battle with the
most eminent of one’s adversaries. Otherwise one confuses newspapers with books,
and petty daily polemic with scientific work. The lesser figures must be abandoned to
the infinite casebook of newspaper polemic (Gramsci, QC, p. 1423; PN, p. 433).

Thus the battle against liberalism had to focus, in Gramsci’s view, on its most eminent
defender, who for him was Croce. Liberalism, for Gramsci, was the dominant
ideology, coming into popular consciousness as ‘the religion of liberty’. In the same
way as the Reformation with its mass appeal contrasted with the Renaissance with its
centre in intellectual circles, typified by Erasmus, so too Marxism, ‘the philosophy of
praxis’, was in contemporary times the movement which challenged liberalism and
represented a total alternative to it.

There seem to be two points which are of contemporary relevance and which can be
drawn from Gramsci’s picture of the ideological struggle between liberalism and
Marxism. First, what he says about liberalism as ideology seems to me to be valid in
our own day. He says that the liberal party (in Italy) transformed liberalism from a
speculative and theoretical philosophy into an immediate and practical political
ideology, ‘a practical instrument of domination and social hegemony’. Here are
Gramsci’s words, in the original. Speaking about liberalism in Italy, Gramsci starts by
noting its broad appeal, and then its more specific and above all practical application:

The acceptance of the term ‘liberal’ in Italy, for example, during this period was very
extensive and far-reaching. In Pietro Vigo’s *Annals of Italy* liberals were all those
who were non-clerical, all the opponents of the party of papal infallibility, and
liberalism thus included even the members of the International. However there was
formed a strand and a party that specifically called itself liberal. This party created an
immediate political ideology derived from the speculative and contemplative position
of Hegelian philosophy. This ideology was a practical instrument of domination and
social hegemony, a means of preserving particular political and economic institutions
founded in the course of the French Revolution and the spreading of the French
Revolution throughout Europe. (Gramsci, QC p.1230).
This suggests that ideology, in this case the ideology of liberalism, is an essential practical set of ideas, linked to specific institutions and practices. What Gramsci calls ‘an immediate political ideology’ is something manifested and realised through very specific structures of power. Liberalism, he seems to suggest, was not just a general philosophy, the ‘religion of liberty’, it found expression in economic and political institutions.

Hence, according to Gramsci, the impossibility of sustaining the distinction which Croce tried to defend between ‘philosophy’ and ‘ideology’. For Gramsci this was a distinction of degree only, not one between two separate categories. Gramsci seems to think that ideology is nothing more (or less) than the application of broad philosophies of life (a philosophy) to practical concrete problems. Let me quote him once more:

Philosophy is the conception of the world which represents the intellectual and moral life (the catharsis of a determinate practical life) of a whole social group conceived in movement and thus seen not merely in its present and immediate interests, but also in its future and reflective interests. Ideology on the other hand is any particular concept of groups within that class which can help to resolve immediate and specific problems (Gramsci, QC, p. 1231).

Thus I would say this is relevant to our time because it suggests that ideological hegemony exists when immediate and practical problems are addressed through particular institutions which in a wider sense manifest a broader philosophy of life and politics, perhaps in an implicit way. To try and make this more concrete, when all aspects of contemporary society, not least universities, work on market or business inspired models, then liberalism (in its contemporary form) becomes the way in which very practical and immediate problems are or have to be addressed. When notions of measurable output are applied to all institutions and spheres of society, the idea of market relations percolates through all of society. Thus a market-inspired liberalism regulates, in very concrete and immediate ways, the practical relations of people in society. In this sense liberalism maintains its hegemony, although it is a liberalism which would alarm liberals like Mill and de Tocqueville, not to mention later ‘new liberals’ like Green and Hobhouse. Ideology is so to speak the practical application of a broad philosophy of life, and the latter becomes dominant and pervasive through ideology. We are all the Monsieur Jourdains of liberalism, speaking liberalism like he spoke prose, without knowing that we are doing so.
The second aspect of Gramsci’s ideas which is relevant to our times is his idea of ideological struggle, or opposition. His hope, of course, was that Marxism, the ‘philosophy of praxis’, would replace liberalism as the dominant philosophy/ideology. Gramsci wanted to develop a form of Marxism that would lead to the creation of ‘a new integral culture’. It would need to develop, said Gramsci, the mass character of the Protestant Reformation as well as of French Enlightenment, in addition to the classicism of Greek culture and the Renaissance: ‘a culture which, following the words of Carducci, would synthesise Maximilian Robespierre with Immanuel Kant, politics and philosophy in a dialectical unity intrinsic to a social group which is not just French or German, but European and global’ (Gramsci, QC p. 1233). The legacy of classical German philosophy would have to become an operative part of life, ‘vita operante’. Marxism was a ‘heresy’ of liberalism, since both were born on the same terrain of modern civilisation. (Gramsci, QC p. 1238). I would suggest there is one sense in which this is relevant, and another in which it is not. My argument is that there is a need for ideological contestation, which is not met in the conditions of contemporary politics, where liberalism has cornered the ideological market. Thus there is indeed the need for a new integral culture, for what I call an ideology of contestation. Can this take the form which Gramsci envisaged? For him both liberalism and Marxism were modernist ideologies par excellence, in contrast to the ‘religion of the Syllabus which fundamentally negates modern civilisation’. Marxism could present a coherent and comprehensive alternative to liberalism. Gramsci thought that Marxism was comparable to the ‘Reformation’ in contrast to the ‘Renaissance’ paralleled in modern times by liberalism. The Renaissance, and liberalism, had in essence been limited to certain restricted groups. By contrast, the Reformation had mobilised the popular masses, as Marxism was doing in modern times: Croce had failed to understand that the philosophy of praxis, with its vast mass movement, has represented and does represent a historical process similar to the Reformation, in contrast to liberalism, which reproduces a Renaissance narrowly restricted to small intellectual groups. (Gramsci, QC, p. 1293).

Are Gramsci’s hopes still pertinent to our times? And if so how could they be fulfilled? The passage of time since Gramsci wrote those lines has in some senses confirmed their relevance, in the following respects. In terms of the question of how
we are to work with ideology in a post-ideological age, my argument is that a new counter-ideology is needed to invigorate politics. Contemporary politics in liberal-democratic politics is characterised by the fact that ideology seems dead, whereas in reality a most powerful ideology is at work. This is the ideology of what I call ‘real existing liberalism’, following on from the concept of ‘real existing socialism’. The latter was used by theorists like Bahro and others, in the days of Soviet-type systems, to contrast the social and political formations which invoked Marxism but whose reality differed sharply from the ideals of classical Marxism. In the same way, I suggest, ‘real existing liberalism’ refers to the dominant ideology of contemporary liberal-democratic societies. Post-ideological society is thus not post-ideological at all. It is dominated by this vulgarised form of liberalism. As Ernest Gellner once caustically observed, ‘Liberty has ridden to victory on the back of consumerism’, and he maintained that pace Joseph de Maistre it was the washing-machine rather than the executioner that was the foundation of social order, at least for the moment (Gellner, 1995). Working with ideology in this supposedly post-ideological society thus involves or should involve not surrendering to this vapid consensus, but seeking to develop a counter-ideology which would restore to political life a sense of possible alternatives and a vision of a society which could develop people’s potential in deeper ways than those held out in the present order of things.

Gramsci offers some pointers to such a counter-ideology. Taking up his parallel which compares liberalism (as exemplified by Croce) to the Renaissance and Marxism to the Reformation, one can see what criteria this suggests for a viable counter-ideology. In his view, what was needed was a contemporary equivalent of Renan’s ‘Reforme intellectuelle et morale’, and Marxism, the philosophy of praxis, could provide this. Reformation and Marxism were both popular movements: they appealed to broad strata of the population, in opposition to the purely intellectual and elitist groups invoked or involved in the Renaissance and in Crocean liberalism. There does seem to be a contradiction here, on the subject of liberalism. Gramsci, as we saw, noted that liberalism had become hegemonic by assuming a popular ‘ideological’ form, concerned with the practical resolution of problems of everyday life. In that sense it extended well beyond a narrow circle of intellectuals. But in his controversy with Croce, he seems to regard Croce as a contemporary Erasmus. Both were intellectuals who developed a Weltanschauung which made a distinction between
ideas and scholarly activity restricted to the literati (philosophy) and a cruder politics (ideology) suitable for the plebs or the masses. My understanding is that Gramsci rejected this distinction. He saw the Reformation and Marxism, for all their differences, comparable in this respect, that they were movements of change and transformation which attempted to inspire wider circles of people and which sought intellectual and moral reform through popular transformation and education, rather than maintaining a gap which could not be crossed between ‘those who know’ and ‘those who do not know’. Whereas Croce thought that it was impossible ‘che il volgo cessi di esser volgo’ (that the vulgar should cease to be vulgar), this was for Gramsci precisely the aim of a transformative political praxis: ‘Gramsci attempts to formulate a notion of the political that is both the product and the carrier of a transformative and innovating praxis’ (Fontana, 1993, p. 72).

So for Gramsci both Reformation and Marxism, as expressions of moral and intellectual reform, were popular movements, that included the ‘vulgar’, and sought to educate them, rather than exclude them. In this connection Machiavelli appears in a crucial role as the democratic philosopher who wants to make the ‘moltitudine’ into a ‘popolo’, into the new subject of politics, the ‘moltitudine sciolta’ into a ‘people/popolo’. I suggest then that one can draw from this picture of Gramsci’s thought a number of criteria needed for an effective counter-ideology in our times. It has to be popular, in the sense of appealing to broad strata of the population. Given that ‘the modern world- whose advent was anticipated in the thought of Machiavelli and whose birth historically was signalled by the American and French revolutions- is characterised by the emergence and development of the popular masses as a socio-political and sociocultural force’ (Fontana, 1993, p. 8), any effective ideology has to be a mass ideology. Indeed this is precisely the nature and purpose of ideology as opposed to philosophy, to be a force mobilising the masses and embracing large strata of the population. It has, furthermore, to involve the idea of a subject or agent, to make practical the visions and theories on which the philosophy at the core of any ideology is based. Furthermore, to be relevant to contemporary conditions such ideologies of moral and intellectual reform must not wish to turn the clock back or regress to bygone eras, but must have a forward-looking orientation. In Gramsci’s view Marxism was a continuation or transcendence of liberalism rather than a mere negation of it, because both were born on the terrain of modern society. They were
both modern ideologies, unlike the doctrine of the ‘Syllabus’ (Papal infallibility) which wanted to abandon the modern era and its gains. Finally, and in connection with the requirement to be a popular or democratic force, an effective ideology must have some emotional or affective element, which could help it perform the task which any ideology needs to perform, the mobilising or inspiring of a democratic ‘clientele’ or constituency. Here Gramsci’s conception of the national-popular is relevant: for him the philosophy of praxis (Marxism) should not turn its back on the nation and on the popular culture of the nation. It had, in the ‘populist’ sense, to ‘go to the people’, and this meant taking up national and popular traditions to forge a new consciousness. So for Gramsci Marxism could meet these criteria for being the new counter-ideology, equivalent to the Reformation of early modern times. It was democratic, popular in the sense of seeking to appeal to larger sections of the population, modernist, and national-popular in that it tried to inspire people with symbols and emotions rooted in popular culture and national traditions.

My final task is to assess the relevance to these ideas to contemporary reality, to the formation of a counter-ideology in opposition to the vulgarised market liberalism which is the dominant ideology of today. While the need for such a counter-ideology is urgent, the difficulty of its instantiation is great, for a number of reasons, some of them having to do with the state of contemporary Marxism. In the light of the experience of the 20th century, ideology has become a dirty word, and so too has Marxism. Both ideology and Marxism, and all the more so the two linked together, have become associated with rapid, total and undemocratic attempts at social and political transformation, culminating in regimes imposing a crude sloganistic ideology. Furthermore, the concept of a subject or agent of change is both more suspect and more difficult of achievement in a society that is fragmented and privatised (itself both a cause and consequence of neo-liberalism’s ideological victory). Finally, in this list of the difficulties, the concept of the national-popular is also problematic, especially perhaps in a country like Britain where many of the national traditions have connotations which are redolent of an imperialist past, rather than a democratic and international future (see Kumar 2003, but also Aughey 2001 for different estimations of the significance of British national identity).
These are all, I argue, not reasons for abandoning the enterprise of developing a counter-ideology, but for going ahead with it in full awareness of the difficulties of the enterprise. The argument presented here takes a different stance from that of Rorty, who makes a distinction between ‘movements’ and ‘campaigns’. The former, which Rorty sees exemplified by Christianity, nihilism, and Marxism (his selection of examples is itself significant) aim at a project of overall transformation. They could be described, though Rorty does not use the word, as ideological. He distinguishes such projects of transformation, or ‘movements’, from ‘campaigns’, which are more limited and specific, finite, concerned with particular injustices or grievances which it is sought to remedy (Rorty, 1995). On this view the requirements of a post-ideological age would be to focus on ‘campaigns’ and to reject the siren calls of ‘movements’. Such movements run the risk of sacrificing the present for the sake of the uncertain goal of future total social transformation.

However, the argument taken in this paper proposes a different way forward. I argue that working with ideology in a post-ideological age means seeking to create the aspirational enthusing appeals of ideology without falling into the excesses and rigidities of some forms of ideological politics in the past. Can this be done? I think it can, and what follows attempts to sketch out the framework of a new counter-ideology, following some of the criteria gleaned from the Gramscian discussion above. I posit the development of a new ideology which is defined by the following themes, which are in a sense the development or reformulation of elements presented by progressive ideologies of the past. The first of these is the theme of self-development, common to both liberalism and Marxism. The dominant ideology of contemporary society holds out a view of freedom as the freedom to choose; this indeed is the title of a popular book by M. Friedman, *Free to Choose* (Friedman, 1980). Both liberalism and Marxism (and here I think is common ground between them) have a more developmental view of freedom, as the freedom to develop human potential. I would argue that in both perspectives this capacity for self-development is not tied to market relations. Indeed market relations with their instrumental perspective are seen as at best necessary but subordinate, or at worst quite inimical, to the development of human potential. This may need no further argument in the case of Marxism. For liberalism one would have to draw on testimony from adherents of ‘the New Liberalism’ like Hobhouse, and also from more classical or mid-century
liberals like J.S. Mill and de Tocqueville. They feared that the development of a market society of individuals each following their individual interests would lower the cultural level of the whole society and would not be conducive to self-development. Consider de Tocqueville’s gloomy fear that in a democratic mass society ‘the mind may keep folding itself up in a narrower compass for ever without reproducing new ideas, that men will wear themselves out in trivial, lonely, futile activity, and that for all its constant agitation humanity will make no advance’ (de Tocqueville, 1968, p. 836). So, I argue, a counter-ideology has to draw on philosophies of self-development, of the potential of human beings to develop their capacities in social and socialising ways. The sphere of the market may be in certain respects a necessary one for economic relations of exchange and distribution, but cannot be sufficient for the central theme of self-development. Hence what I call the new counter-ideology must keep the market in its place. Market relations must not become the paradigm, as they are now, for all relations in the workplace and increasingly in the so-called private sphere. This idea of containing, though not suppressing, the market is found in Gorz’s text *Capitalism, Socialism and Ecology*, where he suggests forms of sociability outside the workplace that escape the logic of the market and capitalist rationality (Gorz, 1994). Hence perspectives of self-development are the necessary foundation for a counter-ideology appropriate to the politics of our time, and can draw on resources of both liberalism and Marxism.

What then of the popular, perhaps emotional, resonances of any counter-ideology? If the business of ideologies is to inspire and mobilise, how can this be done? The twentieth century saw all too many examples of mass mobilisation in the name of exacerbated nationalism, a nationalism of *ressentiment*, fear, hatred and distrust of the other—whether that ‘Other’ was the Jew, the immigrant, those labelled as deviant in some way or other. Hence the difficulties of operating with a concept of ‘national-popular’, which was, as we have seen, one of the ideas in Gramsci’s intellectual toolkit. His analysis of the Italian Risorgimento criticised the Italian ‘Action Party’ for having failed to live up to the model of the French Jacobins. They, the Jacobins, mobilised the peasantry in a truly revolutionary movement, whereas by contrast the Italian *Partito d’Azione* were afraid to do the same. They thus remained in tow to the Moderates, to those like Cavour who organised a national movement from the top down. Hence Gramsci’s characterisation of the Risorgimento as a ‘passive revolution’
which had severe consequences for the nascent Italian state (Gramsci, QC pp. 2010ff.; PN p. 59).

In order for an ideology to be popular, the mixture of nationalism is certainly effective. Hence, one could argue, the fact that a whole range of ideologies of the past (liberalism, socialism, Marxism, fascism, communism) have linked up with nationalism to give them greater pulling power. In turn this has led some commentators to consider nationalism as in itself a ‘thin ideology’ which requires stronger ‘host vessels’ in order to be politically effective (Freeden, 1998). Following and adapting Marx’s dictum in *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* that ‘the social revolution of the nineteenth century can only create its poetry from the future, not from the past’ (Marx, 1973, p. 149), I would suggest that the concept of the national-popular may be dated and not of much help in forging an ideology of progressive politics suitable for our time. Nationalism can certainly be separated from its ethnic and exclusive connotations by giving emphasis to a civic form of the ideology. Such civic nationalism would appeal to all those living on the same national territory, irrespective of ethnic origin, cultural or religious identity and belief, and would find its affective element in symbols of civic unity and shared political rights. This form of nationalism is still relevant in conditions of contemporary politics. But, I argue, it cannot take all the burden of an inclusive and popular ideology, whose catchwords must be different.

An ideology of shared citizenship rights, open to all, is the basis for a new ideology which opposes or seeks to contain the fragmenting and dissolving tendencies of the market. Yet this ideology of citizenship requires further support, in both an economic and in a more symbolic sense. Here we can draw on an idea of economic citizenship and fair reciprocity, as suggested by Stuart White. His notion of a non-ideal form of fair reciprocity involves what he calls the following core commitments (White 2002, p. 90): non-immiseration, market security, work as challenge, minimised class division, and non-discrimination. According to White, if realised in practice economic institutions that satisfied these criteria would demand from their citizens an obligation ‘to make a decent productive contribution, proportional to ability’: all would have an obligation to work and to contribute, subject to society realising the conditions just listed. A more egalitarian society in which work presented ‘a site of intrinsically
valuable challenge’ would be able legitimately to call on citizens to make whatever contribution was in accordance with their ability. Thus a counter-ideology would have to invoke ideas of political and economic citizenship, each complementing the other. This is more appropriate than ideas of the national-popular, though they are not necessarily mutually exclusive. It seems to me that the strength of the national-popular is that it calls up two ideas, those of solidarity, which is in turn based on a shared history, an evolved tradition. Can the combined idea of political and economic citizenship aspire to the same emotional resonances which could be conjured up by the idea of the nation?

The problem here is well stated in debates about constitutional patriotism and political community. Here the issue is whether a concept of shared civic rights is rooted firmly enough in an affective base which is needed in order to give citizens the incentive or emotional stimulus to internalise and make their own ideas of shared political community. (Markell, 2000). My own view is that an idea of ‘the civic minimum’ and joint political/economic citizenship as enunciated by S. White does need to be rooted in a historically based community. The idea of the nation has a role to play, but it takes second place to one of reciprocity and citizenship.

A new ideology which counters ideologies of privatisation, whether literal or metaphorical, is not only possible, but it is highly necessary in the conditions of contemporary politics, in this supposedly post-ideological society. Following Gramsci’s phrase (itself taken from Renan) of ‘moral and intellectual reform’, such reform requires the formation and development of a new ideology of politics. Gramsci thought Marxism could synthesise all that was best and progressive in previous traditions of thought, and go beyond them, as indicated by his remarks quoted above about synthesising Robespierre with Kant. In the conditions of contemporary politics, it is not clear that classical Marxism can still perform this role. I envisage the formation of a new counter-ideology that would combine the following elements, themselves taken from Gramsci, though adapted and developed to modern conditions. Ideas of shared political rights, an ideal of political citizenship, are combined with the aspiration to economic institutions that minimise, as White puts it, ‘the various bads that define the proletarian condition’ (White 2002, p. 90). However, I add to White’s argument two further deepening conditions: the first is that the philosophical core of
this counter-ideology is based on a concept of self-development. This has formed philosophically the basis of both liberalism and Marxism, and has to meet the criterion of a forward-looking ideology that would capture popular enthusiasm. The second condition is that a counter-ideology must possess the emotional resonance needed to inspire the mass basis needed in the conditions of modern politics. Gramsci saw that as emerging at least in part from the national-popular dimension, but that may be a weaker base in times when the solidarity and unity of the nation have been reduced by a much more multi-cultural and heterogeneous population. While not discounting this element, in its civic form, I suggest that it is the force of an ideal of shared citizenship that could provide the emotional element needed for an effective counter-ideology.

The movement of opposition to liberalism requires an ideology which is different from traditional ideologies of the past. I have sketched out above some of the features of this counter-ideology, and suggested it is rooted in ideas of citizenship, economic and political. The final task is to suggest how it both relates to and differs from the main ideological families of the past.

To return to Gramsci for a moment, his idea was that Marxism, the ‘philosophy of praxis’, could provide the effective opposition and transcendence of liberalism. It was, like liberalism, a modernist or progressive ideology, born on the terrain of modern civilisation. But it could go beyond liberalism, as represented by Croce, in that it would appeal to broader strata of the population, it would be the Reformation compared to the ‘Renaissance’ represented by contemporary liberalism. How do these ideas apply today? It has been argued here that the ideological spectrum of contemporary politics is a very narrow one, and that contemporary liberal-democracy needs to be revived by the widening of this spectrum. Furthermore, the widening of this spectrum is to be achieved by the formulation of a new counter-ideology, of egalitarian, progressive nature, which invokes a democratic community of citizenship. This counter-ideology would be in opposition to the thin ideology of vulgarised liberalism which predominates in ‘real existing liberal-democracy’.

What is the relationship of this new counter-ideology to ideological traditions of the modern period? Clearly, following the criteria which I have laid down for this
ideology, it is an ideology of the Left. It takes seriously classical values of the Left, equality, solidarity and reciprocity, as well as a desire to restrain or restrict the scope of commodified market relations. Why therefore not call it socialism, or even Marxism? I would place this new counter-ideology in the camp or ideological family of socialism, though with the following specifications. This new counter-ideology is an eclectic one: it draws on a number of different ideological traditions, to form a new synthesis, yet this synthesis gives it a distinct identity of its own. The links to socialism in general have been explained. With Marxism too the relationship is a close one: the importance of the economic dimensions of citizenship, the urge to take away important political relationships from the sphere of commodity production and to reduce the inequality of class power, and to develop a more harmonious and associative society. Yet whereas classical Marxism saw these aims as being realised through a class-based revolutionary movement, this new counter-ideology sees the achievement of its aims in less deterministic or class-bound ways.

What I have sketched out as a counter-ideology is one which seeks its realisation through a looser range of agencies. It is not through a movement of class politics, at least not in a strict sense, that the vision of this new counter-ideology is to be achieved. Instead it is through one or more political parties operating in the electoral field as well as through a network of cooperative associations in the sphere of civil society that this ideology would seek its practical realisation. This is vague, but it is necessarily so, since this problem raises specific problems of strategy and practical politics which differ from place to place. Marxism in its classical form is characterised by its concentration on a movement of proletarian revolution, with its concomitant strategy of political advance. This involved mass socialist parties moving to victory, forming a majority for socialist policies. This certainly was the electoral strategy of the period of the 2nd International in the period before World War I.

Anarchist critiques of Marxism have emphasised its vulnerability on the question of political power. Bakunin’s critique of Marx’s political practice suggested that once representatives of the proletariat were raised to ‘governmental heights’, they would look down on their former comrades. Those who denied this, Bakunin said, do ‘not know anything of human nature’ (Bakunin, 1973, p. 269). I think the implication is clear, that this new counter-ideology must learn something too from the anarchist
critique, concerning the possible abuses of power, and the need for a widespread participation of people in spheres well beyond the traditional ones of party politics.

This point can be generalised further. I have sketched out this counter-ideology as an ideology of the Left, sharing its values, and yet showing an awareness of the excessive rigidity and deformations which have accompanied ideologies of the Left in their past attempts at practical realisation. This new counter-ideology is an eclectic one, drawing on the strengths of the traditional ideologies of the Western canon, and avoiding those weak points which historical experience has identified. Earlier it was stated that this new ideology had to avoid two opposed dangers, the one of being without vision, the other of having a very rigid and dogmatic vision, imposed on the real movement of politics. My argument is that to avoid the latter of these two dangers, a new form of ideological politics has to draw on a variety of ideologies in an eclectic way so that there is a process of political learning. This involves then the construction of a new ideology which can synthesise various ideological traditions in a progressive way.

This new counter-ideology needs to be inclusive and to be successful in mobilising people to political action, as was stated earlier. This is what political ideologies are in business to do. It must therefore draw on elements in different ideologies which encourage such inclusion on a democratic basis, and point out the distortions of past forms of ideological politics. It seems to be that this is where feminism and ecologism, often seen as new ideologies, have a role to play, not as fully-fledged ideologies in their own right, but as correctives to the rigidity and blind spots of past ideological politics. Feminism in its different varieties has pointed out the male bias and gendered assumptions of ideologies of both Left and Right. Similarly, in a different sort of corrective, ecologism has unmasked some of the excessively anthropocentric assumptions of socialism, and of other ideologies as well. It has thus extended the scope of ideological thinking to bring into consideration the relationship between the human and the natural world, something neglected by ideologies of the Enlightenment tradition.
I therefore conclude with my summary of what working with ideology in a post-ideological age involves. My paper has argued that this requires three fundamental elements:

First, the insistence that what appears to be a post-ideological age is nothing of the sort. Contemporary liberal-democracies are highly ideological. They are dominated by the ideology of vulgarised liberalism, which presents itself as non-ideological. This is what all successful ideologies do, presenting themselves as ‘common sense’, as colouring all assumptions about everyday life. Liberalism in its contemporary dominant form elevates ideas of difference and gives value to the personal sphere; but this is a private sphere dominated by ideas of personal accumulation. This represents an impoverishment of political life and a restrictive range of alternatives presented in the ideological arena.

Second, what then follows from this for the real world of politics? I have argued that what is required is a new counter-ideology, which would fulfil two major functions. It would contest the dominance of vulgarised liberalism. More broadly, it would reinvigorate the ideological sphere and extend the range of political perspectives which are present in political life. This would add new dimensions to the all too narrow ideological sphere of contemporary politics. It would lead to greater excitement in the real world of politics. To be effective, a new counter-ideology has to meet certain criteria, which were derived from Gramsci’s work: it has to mobilise a mass constituency, to have an emotive element, and to have a forward-looking orientation. I have briefly suggested the bases for such an effective counter-ideology, whose central elements are ideas of citizenship, economic and political.

Third, and finally, working with ideology in a post-ideological age, or what passes for such, must involve avoiding the dangers of either an ideology without vision, or the straitjacket tunnel vision of dogmatic and restrictive ideological politics. Therefore, the new counter-ideology must be eclectic, and must make a virtue of that fact, drawing on a range of ideological traditions to meet the criteria of an effective ideology for our times. The future of liberal-democratic politics depends on ideological regeneration. To achieve this, new forms of ideological politics are necessary, and this paper has shown how they could begin to be constituted.
References.


