KEY CONCEPTS

IDEOLOGY

MARIUS S. OSTROWSKI

Ideology

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Preface

In 1967, in his essay 'Negative and Positive Freedom', the philosopher Gerald MacCallum put forward a deceptively simple but at the time profoundly radical claim: that the idea of freedom referred to a single concept. To understand the radicalism of MacCallum's proposition, we have to recall its intellectual context. Under the shadow of recent and ongoing conflicts between liberal democracy and fascist and communist totalitarianism, the philosophical study of freedom had settled on the view, developed by Erich Fromm in 1941 and popularised by Isaiah Berlin in 1958, that there was an irreducible bifurcated distinction between two supposedly incompatible concepts of freedom, each with their own lengthy intellectual traditions. One was 'negative' freedom, *x* is (is not) free from *y*, defined as the absence of any external interference or constraint; the other, 'positive' freedom, *x* is (is not) free to *y*, the capacity to enact one's will and achieve one's aims and potential. With his intervention, MacCallum sought to upend this established consensus. He suggested a formulation that could unite these two understandings, which he termed the 'triadic relation': *x* is (is not) free from *y* to do (not do, become, not become) *z*. The term 'freedom', he concluded, was in fact a single concept; and its 'negative' and 'positive' interpretations were not mutually unintelligible concepts or traditions but merely two *conceptions*, two ways of looking at the same concept from different

angles. MacCallum's essay has become a staple presence on Anglo-American political philosophy syllabi. Every year, legions of students are invited to consider whether the various defenders and detractors of 'negative' and 'positive' freedom – and of its recently recovered sibling 'republican' freedom – are representatives of colossal worldviews talking blindly past one another or indulging the narcissism of the tiniest differences by exaggerating tweaks of perspective into grandiose existential feuds.

It is a similar situation with the concept of 'ideology'. One of the first choices you have to make when writing about 'ideology' – under pressure from representatives of different methodological perspectives, from Marxism to poststructuralism, from comparative politics to social psychology – is whether to run with the idea that there are many incommensurable meanings of the term or insist on staking out a patch of analytical common ground with a concept of 'ideology' on which the various different 'sides' can put their unique 'spin'. There are persuasive defences by eminent names within ideology theory arrayed on either side: to name only a few, Raymond Boudon, Terry Eagleton, and John Thompson for the former approach, David Manning and Martin Seliger for the latter. In very broad terms, the first camp takes the view that 'ideology' is used to refer (correctly or incorrectly, sincerely as well as insincerely) to a host of social phenomena that have only a loose connection with one another – or even contradict one another outright – and that only some should be included in the formal study of ideology, others excluded from it, but all kept rigorously analytically distinct. The second camp, meanwhile, insists that such diversity of phenomena illustrates above all the social pervasiveness and complexity of ideology but does not eliminate the possibility – or obviate the need – to find a way of bringing all of them theoretically 'under the same roof', precisely to reflect the fact that ideology is 'implicated' in all of them, no matter how differently or (seemingly) incompatibly. In this book, I side with the second camp. The upshot is an account of ideology that acknowledges the cumulative wisdom of different ways of analysing it but carves a path towards a definition that is of interest, and of use, to all the areas of social life and social research in which 'ideology' appears.

Neither the fall of Babel of Genesis narrative, then, nor the angels dancing on a pinhead of anti-scholastic polemic, but a judicious ecumenism.

All that remains is for me to acknowledge the help and support of all those who have contributed to making this project come to fruition. Special thanks go to George Owers and Julia Davies at Polity, as well as the anonymous reviewers appointed to read my proposal and my manuscript; the same to my colleagues at the *Journal of Political Ideologies*, especially Michael Freeden and Mathew Humphrey; to all my friends and colleagues who have allowed me to benefit from their invaluable feedback; and to Esther Brown, who has had to listen to me talk excitedly about ideology more than anyone else.

Marius S. Ostrowski
King's Lynn, September 2021

1
Introduction

Among the concepts that colour social life and permeate social research, few carry as many and as diverse connotations as 'ideology'. In essence, 'ideology' signifies a worldview or overarching philosophy, constituted by an integrated body of individual or collective characteristic claims, aims, principles, beliefs, and manners of thinking. Yet, in our vernacular usage, we also inflect the term with a series of highly specific and loaded overtones. We call 'ideological' ideas and arguments that we consider wrong and misleading, that we find lacking in evidence, limited and 'broad-brush' as opposed to nuanced and comprehensive. We use the word to dismiss implausible, abstract theorising when it crowds out sensible pragmatism, idealism versus a solid grip on reality, and fanciful 'visionary' speculation when we want 'cold hard facts'. 'Ideology' means something dangerous and risky, weird and abnormal rather than mainstream, radical as opposed to moderate, synonymous with 'taking things too far'. The term sometimes takes on religious associations: the doctrinal formality of a credo, dogma, or gospel; the zealotry and fanaticism of the 'true believer'. Similarly, we think of ideology as ossifying or freezing discussion and debate, trapping us in a state of opinionated, unreflective mindlessness. This often overlaps with advocacy and propaganda (especially from official or pre-eminent sources), grandstanding, 'playing to the gallery', bias, and blind partisanship rather than

impartiality. 'Ideology' becomes tied up in the material and cultural self-interest of (especially powerful) social groups, who pursue a hidden, nefarious agenda for society with crusading militancy. Meanwhile, we use the most iconic signifier of ideology, the 'ism', to casually and indiscriminately refer to almost any 'way of thinking' (or 'being') or collection of ideas: transnationalism, postmodernism, neoliberalism, Peronism, secularism, of course, but also truism, witticism, neologism, alcoholism, ageism, and so on.

At the same time, in its original historical form, 'ideology' denotes the '*study* of ideas', in the same sense as the (often scientific) acquisition of knowledge associated with constructs such as 'biology', 'criminology', or 'sociology'. Paring the concept down to its semantic roots reveals the rich penumbra of allusive meaning that surrounds it. The 'ideo-' morpheme stems from the ancient Greek word *ἰδέα*: a form or shape, a kind or class of 'element' with a certain inherent nature or quality, a particular outward semblance or appearance, expressing a clear archetypical style, mode, or fashion, all encapsulated in terms such as 'principle', 'notion', and ultimately 'idea'. In turn, *ἰδέα* connotes *εἶδος*, which shares the meanings of 'form', 'kind', 'quality', and 'appearance' but expands on them to incorporate physical figural 'looks', a typical habit, exemplifying or constitutive pattern, state or situation, policy or plan of action, even designated province or department of referential meaning, thus covering the gamut from 'core essence' to 'visible likeness'. Meanwhile, the 'logy' suffix derives from the notoriously multifarious word *λόγος*: fundamentally, it refers to a word or utterance and the process of thought or reflection; yet these meanings are both stretched to cover wider language and spoken expression, phrases and even full sentences, argumentative reasoning, deliberation, and explanation, which together shape debate, discussion, and dialogue. In turn, these inform a vast range of further meanings, from computational reckoning and measurement to reputation, value, and esteem; relations of correspondence to regulative laws; statements of case and cause to formulated hypotheses; mentions of rumour and hearsay to narrative histories or legendary tales; proverbial maxims, proposed resolutions, assertive commands, eloquent literature, and all other senses

of purposive discourse. Perhaps the most accurate way to distil these all into a single definition is to describe 'ideology' as literally an 'account' or 'telling' (i.e., both enumeration and narration) of ideas. Through metonymy, 'ideology' has shifted from referring to a *field* of study to naming the *object* of study itself, as with 'geology', 'pathology', or 'technology'; but the sense of a deliberate, meaningful arrangement of ideas has remained.

These two alternative ways of parsing the concept of 'ideology' speak to rival understandings of the role that ideas and their patterned groupings play in society (Boudon 1989, 23; Geuss 1981, 4–25; Thompson 1990, 5–7). The first casts ideology in a pejorative or negative light: as a source or instrument of dissimulation and manipulation, which fosters equally fictitious unity and disunity among us where neither need exist. The second understanding adopts a non-pejorative if not strictly positive view of ideology: as a way to understand and describe the nature and meaning of the world around us. While there is scope for overlap and compatibility between their claims about 'what ideology is and does', these two understandings have engaged in a long-running struggle for epistemic primacy. Over the two centuries that have elapsed since the term 'ideology' entered the lexicon of social research, their relative balance has continually oscillated, propelled by many crucial developments and 'watershed' events that punctuated society's historical trajectory. Mass enfranchisement, economic collapse, total war and genocide, colonialism and decolonisation, religious revival, and the proliferation of countercultures all left their mark on our conceptions of ideology, tying it to an ever-expanding range of views covering everything from personal identity and behaviour to models of social order. Meanwhile, the analytical study of ideology and ideologies ('ideologology'!) has at various times fostered, resisted, aligned with, and cross-cut these trends. Some approaches have understood their essential task as being to expose and undo the damage ideology causes, from the first Marxists and later the first critical theorists to 'end of ideology' and 'end of history' approaches. Others favour the more equivocal role of seeking to accurately determine ideology's 'laws of motion', from the original *idéologues* and subsequently the first political

scientists to the social theorists, intellectual historians, and social psychologists working on ideology today.

§1 The central questions in the study of ideology

Despite often strongly divergent inclinations towards pejorative or non-pejorative understandings of ideology, the various approaches to ideology analysis consistently feature a core roster of essential debates, which can be framed as a series of contrasting pairs. The most fundamental of these concerns whether ideology is *true* or *false*. This debate hinges on whether ideologies as integrated bodies and 'tellings' of ideas correspond closely and demonstrably with reality, or whether they act as 'alternative realities' that obscure, deflect from, or contrast with reality 'as it actually is'. On the former side, ideology is presented as a set of claims about reality, either as it is or as it should be. Ideologies and their constituent ideas are themselves real, acting as generalised 'placeholders' for everything from personal mindsets to societal institutions; they are also true in that we 'hold' ideas, which influence us into actions and reactions that are likewise real. Moreover, since our encounters with reality in our social existence and actions are always ultimately through (our own and others') subjective experiences, to all intents and purposes the reality 'that matters' is our ideological construction of it, so that ideology is 'true as far as we are concerned'. Meanwhile, the latter side instead sees ideology as an attempt to portray reality as something other than it is: a 'mask' placed over the actual facts, a misdescription of 'how things *really* work' or 'why things *really* are the way they are', a superficial explication and justification that (often deliberately) does not capture the deep societal forces at play. It distracts from other, more important motive influences on our existence and behaviour, such as our interests, drives, or contextual incentives. Above all, ideology creates and maintains a tension between our perception and our experience of society, since there is still a reality 'out there' beyond our capacity to 'name' it.

A closely related question is whether ideology is a *necessary* or *unnecessary* factor in our engagement with reality. The core consideration here is whether all humans rely unavoidably on (in)formal ideological frameworks of meaning, knowledge, and value to understand the world and their place within it, or whether some at least can – and should – transcend ideologies' convenient, insufficiently considered hermeneutic and epistemic 'shortcuts' to reach a 'higher', clearer, and direct form of understanding. One approach argues that our 'access' to reality is only possible via some form of ideology – even if it does not call itself by that name – in the sense that some 'account' of ideas is required to make *any* claims about reality at all. Ineradicable societal division and disagreement over how to engage with reality engenders several viable alternative ways of 'telling' ideas and manifesting them in society (via factions, movements, parties, etc.), laying the foundations for ideological disputes. Moreover, since reality is itself inherently changeable and indeterminate, ideas and their meanings can always be challenged and revised. By contrast, the opposing line is that it is both possible and highly desirable to attain a stance towards reality that lies 'outside' or 'beyond' ideology, typically through applying scientific and critical methods of enquiry. It finds that all divisions can be bridged or overcome, and that compatibilising different 'tellings' provides permanent resolutions to ideological disputes, leading in effect to ideology's elimination. Similarly, it is possible to 'settle' how ideas should be 'recounted' and integrated, and a healthy dose of logical reasoning and empirical testing can mostly remove reality from ideology's 'reach'.

The next dispute is over whether ideology represents a *temporary* or a *permanent* fixture in society. This concerns whether ideology is uniquely a feature of certain forms, phases, or time-periods of human society's developmental trajectory, with an identifiable beginning and end, or a constant presence wherever human society exists, with at most marginal qualitative changes in its essential character. The former position identifies modernity as the 'starting point' of ideology, characterised by increasingly dense, urbanised populations, the shift to mass production in agriculture and manufacturing, innovations in communication and transport, and an increase in the purview and

complexity of state and legal functions. Ideology, on this account, is the fortuitous product of intersections between industrial capitalism and class conflict among bourgeois business owners and proletarian wage-workers, constitutional parliamentary democracy and electoral competition among parties, and contingent Western European geoeconomic–geopolitical–geocultural primacy. It likewise has an identifiable 'end point' through the transition to a new societal form or phase (e.g., 'final communism', globalised liberal democracy). The latter view, meanwhile, denies that ideology can have a definite beginning and, instead, points to clear milestones of qualitative ideological transformation from its long premodern history, tied to theological disputes, feudal rivalries, or personalist courtly factionalism. It observes that ideology is not only present but has often pursued parallel, entirely unrelated trajectories in different societies that are (at least partly) independent of capitalist, democratic, or Eurocentric developments. Accordingly, it is sceptical that there can ever be an 'end of ideology' and, instead, conceives of large-scale societal transition as a change in the dynamics of ideological 'dominance' or 'hegemony', expecting ever new social divisions around which future ideologies can take shape.

Another dimension of debate is over whether ideology is best conceived as a *singular* or a *plural* phenomenon: as ideology or ideolog*ies*. The key question here is whether it should be grasped as a totality alongside other powerful social forces, without becoming distracted by petty internal differences that do not alter its overall effects, or whether treating it monolithically prevents detailed analysis of how complex interpersonal and intergroup social dynamics play out through inter-ideological encounters. One side insists that ideology must be understood, first and foremost, as a discrete social domain with dedicated functions, ranked alongside (and sometimes subordinated to) the economic and political domains and sometimes elided with 'discourse' or 'culture'. On this conception, ideas and how they are 'recounted' or 'told' are epiphenomenal to ideology's social functions, and differences between ideologies are inconsequential compared to the gulf between them and society's economic and political 'drivers'. Insofar as ideology is significantly internally differentiated, it

can be modelled as a single spectrum along which people's positions can be ranked (e.g., liberal–conservative, left–right, radical–reactionary), often using scalar numerical quantifications. The other side argues for a more refined breakdown of ideology that incorporates its extensive range of different social manifestations: its legal, religious, media, and educational aspects as well as its economic and political forms. Likewise, it holds that the precise hierarchy, ordering, juxtaposition, and deployment of ideas is vital to charting simultaneous and intertemporal differences within and between ideologies and their effects on the shape of society. On this granular account, ideology is a collection of many different partly overlapping bodies of ideas – older or newer, larger or smaller, more or less complex and stable – which can be meaningfully sketched out only in multidimensional space.

A further question concerns whether ideology is primarily an *individual* or a *collective* phenomenon. This debate is about whether the locus at which ideology's social effects should be evaluated is human beings' personal mental and bodily status and behaviours, or whether it is more promising to treat ideology as the expression of various societal group dynamics. One view frames ideology in terms of identity, as a mechanism to impose social salience on our personal biological and demographic features, and to create, recognise, and/or push back against our positions in hierarchies of privilege and discrimination. It sees ideology as a social force operating on our personal psyches – mobilising our unconscious and subconscious, crafting correlations with our personality-traits, fostering certain emotions and forms of reasoning, and influencing our evaluative and epistemological judgments. Moreover, it shapes our social behaviours, from voting and consumption preferences to labour decisions and choices over 'personal growth' and self-development (e.g., sport, fitness, leisure pursuits). The alternative view examines ideology as an articulation of social group solidarity based on posited commonalities of contextual situation and experience, motive drives and interests, and social aims and plans. For it, ideology chiefly affects and manifests in the mass psyche, steering the substantive content, direction, and intensity of social attitudes (i.e., public opinion) and collective sentiments (e.g., 'moral panics', 'group feelings',

'national moods') and affecting our conduct in public debate. It defines parameters of toxicity versus acceptability and taboo versus encouraged behaviour in (interpersonal) social interactions, especially where these bridge identity or group divides, and either perpetuates or counteracts power relationships between their participants.

Lastly, ideology analysis divides over whether ideology is principally an *explicit* or *implicit* social phenomenon. Here, the substantial issue is whether ideology takes the form of overt and conscious articulations of its constitutive ideas, which are openly and unambiguously ideological in nature, or whether it is (also/instead) to be found in forms that are not consciously ideological – or even specifically claim to be *non-ideological* – that nonetheless 'deliver' ideological content in a subtle, unwitting, even disguised way. The former approach treats ideology as primarily linguistic and textual, found above all in print, digital, online, and broadcast media, where ideas are directly rendered and where their content and delivery can be subjected to lexical, logical, subtextual–contextual–intertextual, or rhetorical analysis. On this account, ideology appears mainly as self-aware programmatic statements and (discursive) behaviour expressly designed to deliver, frame, and thematise specific ideas in a particular 'telling' (e.g., manifestos, statements of principle, op-eds, demonstrations, scholarly interventions). By inference, ideological analysis is empirical, measuring ideology's social effects through observable, (usually) quantifiable data and involving historical and comparative assessments of social phenomena and events according to their frequency of incidence, scale, and popularity. By contrast, the latter approach highlights how ideology can also be symbolic and 'applied', non-linguistically embedded or summarised, with sensory (especially audiovisual) cues acting as a 'shorthand' for ideas and for the social behaviours and institutions that 'instantiate' them. This approach focuses on 'what is left unsaid', 'everyday' behaviour that reveals unstated, underlying ideological commitments, often presented as 'natural', 'apolitical', 'neutral', or 'common sense'. Its ideological analysis is correlatively more interpretative, evaluating ideology's effects using theoretical models that depict various 'deep-structure' social forces and generalised trends that

are not always immediately discernible from surface-level empirics but require reasoned extrapolation.

Different traditions and approaches within the study of ideologies have different views on each of these six debates. Some of these views are well known within and even beyond social research: orthodox Marxism's assessment of ideology as false (an illusion), temporary (a feature of the capitalist present), and singular (the total assemblage of pro-capitalist values and institutions); or the assumption that it is plural (divided into rival families), collective (held by groups of voters and legislators), and explicit (expressed in manifestos and opinion polls) in comparative-political party systems studies. Of course, these differences are a major part of what delineates such traditions from one another, partly because of and partly in parallel to deeper divergences in their methodological assumptions. Yet even where they happen to agree, they may do so for entirely unrelated reasons: for example, a view of ideology as individual may stem from an atomistic conception of the structure of society or a focus on the priority of subjective experience. What makes these questions *central*, however, is the fact that every tradition finds itself in the position of having to take a stance – whether one-sidedly 'committed' or equivocally 'compatibilist' – within each one of these debates. This means that these six 'contrasting pairs' are best conceived as binary poles at the extremes of six 'ideologogical' spectrums, with ideology-theoretical approaches falling somewhere in between them on each one: for instance, seeing ideology as 'more false than true', 'largely necessary', 'definitely plural', 'both explicit and implicit', and so on. It is thus possible to 'map out' traditions of ideology analysis in terms of the constellation of points they occupy on all of these spectrums: for example, social psychology's view of ideology as (roughly) true–(fairly) necessary–permanent–plural–(mainly) individual–explicit, or critical discourse analysis's reading of it as false–(reluctantly) necessary–permanent–(more) plural–individual *and* collective–explicit *and* implicit, and so on. By the same token, as a heuristic exercise, we may find it useful to 'map out' our own views on each of these questions to see whether we find ourselves more sympathetic to some traditions than others, to a hybrid combination of their positions, or to a whole new 'ideologogical' conception entirely.

§2 From the study of ideology to ideology studies

Aspects of these questions have formed part of the standard material of philosophy and social theory since at least the Renaissance. Epistemology and philosophy of mind, language, science, and religion, and branches of early ethnography and cultural studies have long considered the relationship of abstract ideas to reality as either 'inner essences' or mediated representations, whether we can acquire reliable knowledge about the world, whether morality is real or synthetic and absolute or relative, the nature and sources of popular opinions, and so on. But, since around 1800, these questions have been increasingly corralled together under the rubric of addressing a specific social phenomenon. The first to use the term 'ideology' for this phenomenon were a group of late Enlightenment philosophers in post-Revolutionary France, who saw in it the promise of a new science of ideas, mental perceptions, and thought processes. But its rise to prominence (and its metonymic shift) came with the Marxist transformation of social thought from post-Hegelian philosophical materialism into the embryonic outlines of sociology, which tied 'ideology' explicitly to the cultural manifestations of capitalist, classist society. At the turn of the 1900s, sociology's crystallisation as a discipline with many parallel traditions (positivist, anti-positivist, conflict-theoretic, functionalist, etc.) introduced new focuses on the collective and individual dynamics of crowd psychology and the role of propaganda and the media, as well as non-classist explanations for ideological support. Meanwhile, the growing prominence of scientific and statistical research methods enabled new approaches to studying ideology via polling, quantitative survey research, and breakdowns of electoral results. By the mid-1900s, the ascendancy of social science pushed the study of ideology heavily towards comparative empirical assessments of voters' and legislators' policy preferences and the demographics of pro- and anti-system movements. At the same time, new challenges and modifications to classical social theory (especially the rise of structuralism and