IDEOLOGY: PICKING UP THE PIECES?

Ideología: ¿recoger los pedazos?

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Abstract

Ideology studies have undergone considerable transformation over the past thirty years. New methodologies and approaches have recast the insights and interpretations it can deliver and that have established it as a major type of political thinking. More recently, however, the production and dissemination of ideologies have adopted novel forms that present a challenge even to the latest manifestations of thinking politically among groups and societies. They demand a reassessment of effective ways of understanding ideologies, especially under conditions of broad but fragmented articulation and circulation. Ideologies are now in pieces, dismantled, fractured, sporadic, discontinuous, even scavenged. The article discusses six trends in the mutation of their contents and patterns: deintellectualization, the brevity of transmitted messages, the democracy-challenging super-atomization of voices in the public domain, the increasing speed of change, the easy transfer of ideas across conventional boundaries, and a subtle opacity, often unintentionally concealed from producers and consumers alike. Their study can benefit from combining the investigation of the durable features of conceptual morphology with a sharp eye for the fluid and shifting cultural currents within which that morphology is filtered.

Keywords

Ideology; disaggregation; political thinking; colloquial language; silence.

Resumen

Los estudios sobre ideología han sufrido una transformación considerable en los últimos treinta años. Nuevas metodologías y aproximaciones han moldeado las percepciones e interpretaciones que puede formular y que la han situado como una categoría principal del pensamiento político. Más recientemente, sin embargo, la producción y la difusión de ideologías han adoptado formas novedosas que suponen un desafío incluso a las últimas manifestaciones del pensamiento político entre grupos y sociedades. Demandan un replanteamiento de las formas efectivas de comprensión de las ideologías, especialmente bajo condiciones de articulación y circulación amplias, pero fragmentadas. Las ideologías están ahora hechas pedazos, desmanteladas, fracturadas; son esporádicas, discontinuas, incluso arruinadas. El artículo discute seis tendencias en la mutación de sus contenidos y patrones: desintelectualización, la brevedad de los mensajes transmitidos, la superatomización de voces en la esfera pública que desafían la democracia, la creciente velocidad de cambio, la fácil transferencia de ideas a través de las fronteras tradicionales y una sutil opacidad, a menudo ocultada inintencionadamente para productores y consumidores. Su estudio puede beneficiarse de la combinación de la investigación de los rasgos duraderos de la morfología conceptual con una mirada afilada hacia las corrientes culturales fluidas y cambiantes en las cuales se filtra dicha morfología.

Palabras clave

Ideología; división; pensamiento político; lenguaje coloquial; silencio.

CONTENTS

I. THE TRANSFORMED LANDSCAPE OF IDEOLOGY STUDIES

The study of ideologies is at yet another turning point. In recent years, it has divested itself from past slavish adherence to the Marxist view of ideology as distorted, class-based, hegemonic, dogmatic, and dehumanizing. It has rejected the allegation that ideologies are a mystification of reality, asserting instead that such "mystifications" and "phantoms of the brain" are themselves part of human experience and life and accordingly need to be accepted as a component of what moulds political thinking; that is, as a vital part of the ideological imagination. It has graduated from crude dichotomous categorizations of ideology still prevalent in the US, such as liberal versus conservative. It has queried the sweeping assertion that societies host a dominant ideology when that so-called dominance is subject not only to fluctuations among contending ideologies but is a central feature of the internal elements of any ideology, rising and falling in relation to each other. It has sharpened its focus to interrogate the complex and fluid internal structures of its conceptual configurations. It has moved from the macro to the micro, approaching political thought as a ubiquitous and multi-layered assortment of loosely-patterned but decipherable mental processes at diverse levels of articulation, endemic to all societies. It has explored a multitude of cultural traditions and innovations across societies and has made them yield specific insights into the political features embedded in them, whether overt or covert. It has harnessed not only the regular questions about power, freedom, legitimacy and the distribution of resources that political theory directs at its field of inquiry, but has extracted a host of illuminating and relevant perspectives from other disciplines, be they anthropology, psychology, literature, discourse analysis, or history.

Above all, the enhanced study of ideologies has raised awareness of ideology's centrality in understanding and appreciating what happens in the minds of people and in their practices as members of social groups, large and small, when they think about political issues and act on those thoughts. Ideologies

have been recognized as the ineliminable port of call through which political thought enters the world and obtains its shape, impact, and purpose. And yet, notwithstanding all these elaborations and refinements, the production of ideologies is now at the mercy of radically transformed modes of expressing and conveying political ideas and opinions for which —with all their rediscovered sophistication— ideology studies face new challenges. If ideologies were typically regarded as closely knit and cohesive bodies of thought, however inaccurately, they are undergoing radical disaggregation. The methodology employed by students of ideologies must adapt to their de facto deconstruction as colloquial political utterances while maintaining a grasp on novel and orderly ways of decoding them.

The process of disaggregation has been slow. Initially, it gnawed at the shared feature of many grand ideologies to claim universalism for their ideas. But the fatal attraction of pure universalism is that it collapses both space and time; indeed, it makes them invisible. As an unintended side-effect, it also bestows the kiss of death on disciplines such as history and anthropology. Liberals thus began to circulate competing units, or currencies, of universalization. Specifically, a fundamental shift of emphasis occurred when we compare the 19th and much of the 20th century with the late 20th century and beyond. Briefly, the move is from the two older stalwarts of liberal language —nation-states and markets— to the two more recent ones of cultures and ethnicities[1]. The universalism of nation-states and of markets pulled in different directions. The first is predicated on universalizing a nation's sovereignty over their territory and their history. For sovereignty is not only the ultimate control over space but the ultimate control over time —witness the attempt of right-wing populists to privatize time as in "this is our exclusive story". The second is predicated on a conviction in the utilitarian advantages of pursuing self-interest as the key to a benign economic world order.

It was however the third emphasis on cultures and ethnicities that tore up the old liberal rule book concerning a unified social universe, a book in which human similarities had dictated legal and political relationships. The chimera of social unity began to dissipate. The new structural universalism was not predicated on shared values and practices but lay in the ubiquity of ethnicity and life-styles as features common to all societies. The awareness of liberals that multi-culturalism and multi-ethnicity were not only facts of social life, but features to be assimilated into liberal values, and even welcomed, was gradual. However, the distinction between the two is significant in

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[1]   Freeden (2015).

understanding how liberal universalism was undergoing transformation. Multi-culturalism entailed for liberals the recognition of variety —individual diversity writ large; but multi-ethnicity was a shift of gear, entailing the recognition of the normality of difference, a normality that departed from the unifying, monolithic tendency of older liberalisms, except perhaps that implicit in the Hapsburg Empire. Whereas left-liberals had rediscovered society as an interrelated internal community that enabled individuals to flourish and consolidate; multi-ethnicity gambled not on commonality but on the acceptance, and eventual extolling, of group diversity as the integrating mechanism that enabled dissimilar, even mutually suspicious, social amalgams to co-exist under a common aegis[2].

Since then, more radical forms of break-up —and break-down— have emerged. I propose to extrapolate some trends that, I suspect, may be with us for a while. I will pick out six of them: deintellectualization, the brevity of transmitted messages, the democracy-challenging super-atomization of voices in the public domain, the increasing speed of change, the easy transfer of ideas across conventional boundaries, and a subtle opacity, often unintentionally concealed from producers and consumers alike. In sum, we are now called upon to adapt ourselves to dramatic mutations in the ways ideologies are produced and transmitted, drifting away from the relatively homogeneous and integrated manner in which they have hitherto been classed and understood —those great, monolithic ideational titans of the past. Ideologies are in pieces, dismantled, fragmented, sporadic, discontinuous, even scavenged. There will of course be submerged continuities, discernible to scholars and researchers more than to the general public. But what has changed are patterns of communication, themes of recognizable durability, and the identity of the articulators of ideology.

If we wish to consider how, if at all, those broken Humpty-Dumptys can be put back together again, it will certainly not be by gluing back the shattered bits but by reassessing what ideologies look like as we travel through a 21st century no longer in its infancy. What, for instance, might a textbook on ideologies contain? Will it move away from traditional accounts of ideological families as broad and inclusive constructs with ambitious socio-political plans, and focus instead on modes of ideological dissemination that dictate its contents, or perhaps on a shift in production sites? Will it decentre intentional human agency and subordinate the role of states, governments and parties in the spread of ideologies to other, more inchoate, groupings? Will it condition us to anticipate brief soundbites as the vehicles of ideological efficiency, rather

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[2]   Parekh (2000).

than detailed and serious elaborations of *Weltanschauungen* with pronounced philosophical and theoretical weight? Will that textbook re-educate us in our expectations of time and change, causing us to jettison notions of ideological continuity as well as accepting a far more rapid rate of volatility as the norm? Will the quick redundancy and short shelf-life of speech and writing disable the weaving of national stories sustained by historical or even mythological appeal? Will it abandon the endeavour to fashion coherence and reason out of ideological discourse, and switch instead to forms of expressivity, assertions of individual identity, and perlocutionary performativity? We have of course inklings of all those in other fields of knowledge, particularly in literary analysis —and lest we forget, ideologies are also texts— but so far they have not tipped the balance to become mainstream requirements of ideology studies.

There also are emerging challenges to the scholarly *analysis* of ideologies, heightened by the sensitivity of some groups to what they regard as the superimposition of intrusive and offensive categorizations on their identities. Some of those objections relate to a defiant, or perhaps merely uninformed, unwillingness to distinguish between the requirements of ideology studies to address the explanandum, the empirically observable thought-practices that are essential to interpreting political discourse, and the first-order language and signs that individuals and groups employ in communicating with each other. The breaching of that boundary raises the question whether there will be a need to practise a highly unsettling terminological self-censorship to appease strident guardians of political correctness and wokeness who are stranded between a reasonable concern for vulnerable minorities and planting the seeds of a linguistic intolerance.

That is particularly problematic for a discipline that focuses on the nature of political discourse and for which the specific and uncensored use of words are crucial to the interpretation of discourse —to feeling and measuring the ideological pulse that we as scholars are curious to understand and to doing so without fear or favour. Which words will ideology scholars be required to gloss over or euphemize, incapacitating the professional skills and knowhow demanded of the analyst and impoverishing the cultural sources they seek to elucidate? Currently they relate mainly to the terminology applied to race, ethnicity, and gender —a terminology so fluid that ephemeral linguistic practices are outmoded or subject to sudden taboos even before, metaphorically speaking, the fresh ink is dry on their predecessors. The elimination of their conceptual history is highly detrimental to the knowledge scholarship can gain from their usage, their force, their frequency, and their context. One may note the justifiable objections of the doyen of conceptual historians, Reinhart Koselleck, to excluding the vocabulary of the period

1933-1945 in Germany from the remit of its conceptual history[3], even though in the longer run that vocabulary might be seen not only as a moral abomination but as a cultural aberration. These, however, are issues pertaining to the research ethos in which ideology studies find themselves operating, rather than the substantive modifications that the study of ideologies is undergoing.

II.   CONFRONTING NEW TRENDS

What, then, are the six trends in detail? To begin with, we are well-advanced on the path leading to a transformation of, and retreat from, the intellectual discourses that characterized the domain of ideologies since it first became a battleground over large-scale cultural and political identities, whether national or international. Ideologies were propelled by past philosophical methods and expectations, disseminated through books, journals, and pamphlets, so that even when not persuasively intellectual, most of them nodded in the direction of literacy and stylistic gravitas. No less significantly, the writings of major political philosophers were presented as prime ideological source material. Locke was anachronistically hailed as the father of liberalism *avant la lettre*, particularly in the US through controversial studies such as Louis Hartz's *The Liberal Tradition in America*[4] —though that in turn was subverted by John Rawls' unrealistic, i.e. ahistorical, tracing back of American (universal) liberal principles as much to Kant as to Locke[5]. Rousseau was applauded as the master theorist of democracy before its crucial pluralist trappings arrived on the scene. Burke was repeatedly and rightly singled out as the archetypical conservative thinker, although that obscured the reactionary side of conservatism. No less worryingly —in true traditional history of philosophy fashion— hardly anything of note was thought to have happened around the pronouncements of luminaries other than the arguments of such exceptional philosophers and intellectuals, as if they had been writing in a conceptual vacuum. Political thinking as a complex group product was passed over; its buzzing, fermenting and multi-polar world was inaudible and, if audible, inconsequential.

By contrast, one of the most significant developments in ideology studies has been the break away from perusing high-quality ideological texts in order to embrace as well (not instead) the everyday sources and discourses that

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[3]   Personal conversation (2003).
[4]   Hartz (1955).
[5]   Rawls (1996).

circulate in a society. The constraining legacy of philosophers conceptualizing and writing the history of political ideas —identifying a couple of geniuses per century, as if that were deserving of the descriptor "history" rather than an apostolic succession— has been to ignore the proliferation and swirl of myriad discourses that underpin and nourish ideological families such as liberalism or socialism. Thus, John Stuart Mill may occupy a seminal space in the best and most profound iteration of liberal philosophy, but he is largely unrepresentative of the currents, expressions, and contradictions typical of nineteenth century liberalism, and consequently to study him in isolation misrepresents the historical and empirical diversity that liberalism represents.

The challenge confronting political theorists as students of the actual political thinking in a society runs deeper. Like any form of human thinking, it comes in many kinds of guises and constitutes a problem of sharply divergent sophistication and accessibility. Does that matter? Only if we follow the admonitions of an Oxford philosopher who warned me some 30 years ago that any scholar who studies "inferior" thought can only produce inferior work. For those who are more open-minded and less dogmatic about what serious research can produce —and for political theorists who simultaneously consider themselves to be social scientists— the full range of thinking politically is an intriguing object of curiosity that can raise crucial insights into the political. It concerns the normal thought-practices generated in a society that are thrown into the mix of what propels, or retards, political processes and the many levels on which they demand analysis and interpretation. Disorganization, inconsistencies, and even chaos and disruption are built into social life, ipso facto into political thinking. To turn a blind eye to those phenomena because of intellectual purism and perfectionism, or a moralism that disdains the corrupt and the ill-thought out, simply cannot come to terms with the intricate variability that makes a society tick. And before we can offer prescriptions and solutions to what we might consider to be socio-political desiderata, we ought to acknowledge that heterogeneity and disparity are ineliminable attributes of our subject-matter and indispensable to making informed judgments and choices. That is the task charged to ideology studies, though it should equally be picked up by other branches of political theory. Messiness, rather than neatness, is the main characteristic of thinking politically, and its sporadic and disorderly nature requires full acceptance in the methods and techniques of ideology investigation, rather than denial or circumvention.

One might have thought that Marx and Engels —those pioneers of a more inclusive view of humankind— would have paved the way to a broader presentation of the political thinking of societies, whether industrial or agrarian. The books, articles, and manifestos that they wrote became the

basis for a distilled, widespread ideology, tellingly named "Marxism", a word paying homage to the leading partner in that pairing long after their path-breaking and personal contributions had given way to entire competing schools of thought. As is well-known, the two thinkers claimed to articulate a scientific position that would detail the tribulations of the proletariat and unlock the truths that would emancipate it. But, tellingly, they rarely processed the ideas circulating in and from that class. Instead, they wrote *in the name* of a class, rather than letting that class voice its own understandings. That method of analyzing ideologies is no longer viable: the minds of the scholar-analyst are necessary but insufficient to offer a rounded picture. They are no substitute for hard textual and performative evidence relating to the views of the participant population under investigation. *The German Ideology* contains the famous passage: "In direct contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, here we ascend from earth to heaven"[6]. But the ascending route chosen by Marx and Engels is the wrong one for the contemporary student of ideologies. It bypasses "what men say, imagine, conceive" because those are "phantoms" that sublimate their material life-process —and they reserve the notion of ideology to such "fantasies". Hence they dismiss "morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness".

By contrast, those "phantoms", those patterns of political thinking, are exactly what possesses significant independent value for current ideology studies and what places them at the heart of those studies, enabling a different ascending route from earth. For those ideas exist, and are as much a part of human imaginative and psychic reality, and as empirically verifi-able, as the physical processes from which they may (or may not) arise. Marx and Engels lay stress on the historical and material causality that determines the rise of consciousness. But they are arguing against a Hege-lian type of generalized and abstract consciousness considered to pervade being independently of matter. Wedded to that Hegelian understanding they would not have been able to appreciate an alternative interpretative path, focusing not on what *causes* social and culturally infused conscious-ness and patterns of argument, but on what they mean and look like in their own right, what work they discharge in everyday life, and what possibilities of comprehension, action or inaction they open up or foreclose. It may be that we unintentionally practise a form of cultural elitism by prioritizing the frameworks imposed selectively by Marx and Engels on their version of what counts as real, and that we do so at the cost of listening carefully

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6   Marx and Engels (1970: 47).

to what extensive swathes of the population actually think, say and believe in. That requires maintaining a tricky balancing act between representing the cross-social ideologies actually circulating, holding their ground as major ideational creations, and between the desire to accord due recognition to the quality of political and ideological thinking that emanates from the "high culture" intelligentsia of a society, crowding out less impressive forms of expression. It appears to be catered to by socio-psychological attitude studies that employ large "N" statistical analysis, but they lack the ideational and conceptual finesse now expected of ideology scholars.

That brings in another heuristic difficulty in carving out a distinct area of ideology as an academic enterprise. The insistence of some branches of the social sciences on what is termed "evidence based" research appears to dismiss the kind of qualitative appraisal of ideas in whole texts. Granted that the abstract discussion of philosophical arguments that was a staple of examining ideologies has drifted away from what empirical analysis expects, it is nonetheless highly misleading to imply that the non-statistical rendering of views and opinions falls short of constituting evidence. Quite the contrary: evidence is provided by the analyst, deploying any number of interpretative frameworks that highlight some findings and marginalize others. Take the common colloquial adage, "the facts speak for themselves". It is a conversation stopper, suggesting that there is no case to answer, that the evidence is "hors de combat". But facts don't speak. They are silent, while human voices speak in their name, superimposing their reading as an incontrovertible statement that apparently renders interpretation unnecessary. Nonetheless, the very presentation of facts always involves choice, prioritization, and concealment. It gives the lie to the argument that science supplies monolithic and unified knowledge and that its authority is incontrovertible[7]. Obviously, interpretations differ wildly in their validity and gravitas, but their weight is determined by a range of academic considerations including complexity, critical distance, and relevance. Karl Mannheim's insightful discussion of the relativism of world views contributed to the growing acceptance of the subjective malleability of language, perception and conceptualization[8]. His epistemological pluralism acknowledged that social and political understandings were liable to change over time and across space. If pluralism entailed the fracturing of absolutes, its separate components were not fissiparous, but the gateway to a rich and often complementary unlocking of meaning.

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[7]   See e.g., Basevic (2020).
[8]   Mannheim (1936).

Even those who take ideologies seriously as macro-bodies of political thinking aimed at justifying or changing the socio-political arrangements of or in a society are feeling the heat. Not because their perspective is misguided, but because its affinity with grand philosophical schemes is too complex to be imparted to political audiences who as a rule lack the interest, stamina, patience, and often the educational resources, to absorb nuances of disputation and a diverse palette of views. Who indeed has the time and the attention span to commit to the granular intricacies of those thick ideologies in the population at large, even though they are directed at the mass recruitment of support? One can see the equivalent in the evolution of the modern newspaper. The 19th century heavyweight broadsheets, with their nine columns of pictureless small print covered events in copious detail but were directed at sections of the educated middle classes. In contrast, current tabloids aim at readers who mainly seek low level, immediate entertainment. In their visible public messaging ideologies, too, have become brief, close to realizing George Orwell's prescient dystopia of catchy slogans. Even party manifestos have shrunk in size, accompanied by a blurring of specificity. Ideologies need to fit the medium at their disposal. For Hamlet's Polonius, brevity was the soul of wit; for the contemporary ideologist, brevity is the key to memorability and to mobilizing short-term support. But it is more than that. In an era of mass politics, the vaguer and more ambiguous your well-crafted message, the more likely it is that it may generate Paul Ricoeur's surpluses of meaning that can be adjusted by the reader or listener to their satisfaction[9]. One is reminded of President George Bush senior's parsimonious electioneering slogan in 1988 "Read my lips. No new taxes". Every additional sentence would have cost many thousands of votes.

The real ideological metamorphosis of the 21st century, however, lies in what on the surface is ostensibly a democrat's dream: the opening of down-up channels of public participation in collective political life without barriers, provided you have and can afford online access. But rather than the inclusivity it seems to offer, it is a mode of super-atomization, its verticality minimizing horizontal ideational group interaction and the reflective production of political ideas, not least through splintering the notions of community that are assumed to underpin proper participatory democracy. At any rate, large scale polities, even with manifest democratic loyalties, cannot sustain that potential individuated equality in expressing voice that the social media encourage. Political systems are designed to bunch voices together lest they become unmanageable. Currently, however, a chaotic ideological fragmentation removes the filters that protect the public domain from a cacophonic inundation through electronic

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[9]   Ricoeur (1976).

channels[10]. It considerably diminishes the discriminatory capacity of listeners and viewers to attach variable weight and judgment to the myriad voices now effortlessly securing a stage, making it difficult to judge messages on the basis of their quality, seriousness or contribution to group dialogue.

If the ideologies within democratic societies have been focused on a competition over the control of public policy, and have been regarded as an invaluable aid to discharging citizenship duties, that feature —while still in place— is now operating against a noisy background clatter. Extreme individuation and disconnect also entail extreme self-centredness and, to the extent that political views are transmitted, they serve micro-political ends, with personalized, stochastic, and thin ideological ingredients. Ideological stances are removed from the macro-public arena and rendered difficult to monitor. What is mischaracterised as the *democratization* of voice is, rather, its replacement by *demotic* voices, a Tower of Babel facilitation of quasi-private, undiluted and often strident opinion.

Another prominent feature of recent times is the speed of ideological change or, to put it differently, the growing incidence of ideological transience. Of course, ideologies have always undergone change, except that now ideological cores no longer possess the strong gravitational pull to keep their structures intact and their morphologies steady. It used to be the case that ideological cores moved slowly in comparison with their more dynamic adjacent and peripheral components, but they too are undergoing dislocation. For instance, more volatile adjacent elements —not least considerations of electoral viability and the breakdown of older-style uncompromising socialism— dictate the perceptions of socialists in moving away from core notions of material equality and identity of human worth to conceptions of equality of opportunity. The latter is still a highly flexible container of meaning, but one now virtually indistinguishable from left-liberal positions, and even paid lip service by some conservative arguments. For former socialists it is an acknowledgement of individual choice and freedom, replacing collective one-size-fits-all versions. For liberals it is an acknowledgement that treating people alike is more than a formal legal and political requirement, now demanding compensation for socio-economic and cultural disadvantages. Take for example the view of one of the UK's leading left-liberals —J.A. Hobson— over a century ago when he voiced a radical programme: "Free land, free travel, free power [energy], free credit, security, justice and education, no man is 'free' for the full purposes of civilised life to-day unless he has all these liberties"[11].

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[10]   Hindman (2009).
[11]   Hobson (1909: 113).

Clearly, changing electoral demographics invite new strategies of ideological mobilization. And the growing aversion to the label socialism, notably in Western European countries where socialist and social democratic ideologies originated or were at their strongest but were deemed in recent decades to fail or disappoint, tells its own story. The unifying and singular power of labels has suffered as a self-identifier in the new world of ideologies. Populism is adopted as a positive label only in a few Latin American countries. The term thrives mainly because its opponents persistently attach that label to its shallow ideas. Liberalism is being discredited, ironically, for its great asset, tolerance —assumed to pave the way, in Trojan horse fashion, for its enemies and detractors— and superseded by an aggressive and narrow neoliberalism or, in the case of Orbán's Hungary, even replaced by "illiberal democracy" worn as a badge of honour. Only a minority of countries, such as the UK, dare utter the adjective "conservative" as an honourable political term, and in the Japanese or Australian instances they conceal many of its tenets under the Liberal party banner. Anarchism has suffered its own ironies, subverted by its proclivity to engage in in-your-face *political* activities, some of which they denounce in theory. Solely the label "Green" now serves as an ideological magnet.

There is another side to the equality of opportunity phenomenon, shared also with the infusion of neo-liberal and ordo-liberal ideas into liberalism. It relates not to the rate of change but to a complementary feature: the growing looseness of structure ideologies undergo —yet another indication of disintegration. Equality of opportunity has cut adrift from its conventional moorings and is now available either in core or adjacent form in a free transfer for a disparate range of claimants. Market liberalism has cut adrift from its former powerful humanist moorings and is circulating even amidst state-socialist regimes. That is no longer a question of changes occurring within the confines of a specific ideology, but the free-floating availability of ideological segments across a spectrum of ideologies. Openness to accommodating evolving understandings does not however mean convergence, but testifies to the increased patchiness of ideologies. Contemporary ideologies are revealing a marked vulnerability to disruptive hiatuses, when the labels that used to indicate their contents no longer serve that purpose. We know that to the right of the political spectrum —another spatial analogy that has begun to lose its compass— socialism and communism are addressed as coterminous both among supporters and disparagers, not least among the American right. We know that among Chinese guardians of their state ideology —a term reserved exclusively and insistently for the ideas and programmes of the Chinese Communist party— there is a blanket refusal to distinguish between

liberalism and neoliberalism, a refusal that barely masks a deliberate ideological obfuscation.

Adherents of both liberalism and socialism in their original European habitats display their own discontinuities. Obviously, ideologies can evolve or degenerate. But they increasingly exhibit signs of presentism, severed from their own pasts, and move to colonize the available ideational space in order to rearrange the multiplicity of meanings that had accumulated. Thus, British liberals have downgraded many of their past identifying beliefs that emerged from the late 19th century onwards, such as the insistence on mutual interdependence as the condition of human flourishing, and have resumed the guise of a more individualistic and negative-liberty oriented creed[12]. The belief in the unifying power of a rational liberal society dissolved under the centrifugal impetus of a minorities-sensitive ethos (alongside, I am tempted to say, a minorities-nervous disposition). That new pluralism stepped back from fostering commonality and vacillated between a genuine welcoming of variety —now among groups as much as individuals— and a laissez-faire attitude towards the norms such groups adopted. And recently many liberals have draped themselves in plagiarized green colours —perfectly justifiable— but at the expense of their historic emphasis on human rights and equality-based reforms. That is not intended as a critical comment, but as an observation on the fluidity of the identifier "liberal". Perhaps indeed poetic justice, given that the real success of liberalism has in the past been achieved by exporting several of its core ideas to neighbouring ideologies, whether through the programmes of the welfare state or the promotion of constitutional constraints on policy makers. One might nonetheless argue that advocates of a green agenda have no need to approach it via liberalism. It could well be more easily accessed by means of a conservatism harnessing its etymology to preach conservation. The green precautionary principle, after all, seems to come right off the conservative song sheet, but the prevention of harm was prioritized by liberals such as Mill.

III.   DECODING IDEOLOGIES: MOVING ON

Ideologies are essential simplifiers and streamliners, but when decoupled from their conventional families and reassessed, that leads to new complexities and multiple combinations. Our old classificatory schemes offer little comfort here. They may need to be ditched and new knowledge technologies

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[12]   Freeden (2018).

put in their place. The recourse to detailed theories addressing the conventional logocentric nature of ideologies has made way for ideologies to be embedded in practices, in visual form, and in letting-off-steam through tweets and WhatsApp communities, not in ponderous essays or monthly literary reviews. Those are now our main sources. In the PPE admissions interviews at my Oxford college, my philosophy colleague used to be fond of asking: "How many grains of sand make a heap?"(the Sorites paradox). It is the impossible problem of drawing an accurate boundary between qualitative gradations. Well, how many tweets transform a message into an ideology? We are stuck between the Scylla of sweeping generalization and the Charybdis of unmanageable minutiae. Statistical aggregation is of limited use in a world of ideational disaggregation, and inappropriate for the study and interpretation of political ideas, no matter where they originate. So if the authority of intellectual top-down no longer works, and if the fluency and intricacy of ideological argument has not only become rare, but of little interest to its potential clientele, how do we proceed?

To begin with, the ascension from bottom up, both in terms of the human formulators of ideological viewpoints and in terms of the loose assortments that now typify what used to be regarded as robust and stable ideological families, requires not only extending our vista and bringing in new sources, but applying a magnifying glass to what we can observe. I have long called for the pluralization of ideological headings from liberalism to "liberalisms", from socialism to "socialisms". But that may no longer be sufficient. Perhaps we now need to take a further step, even if it flies in the face of the heuristic, pedagogic, and party-political attractiveness of clear defining names, and allow the many pieces that make up the fabric of an ideology to find their own way of coalescing with one another or, indeed, failing to do so. It may not be up to us as researchers to dictate the order within that loose-leaf album —that kind of intervention would imperiously substitute our evaluations for those to whom we are endeavouring to give voice. Naming, after all, imposes straitjackets. Rather, our research role should be to take frequent samples of shifting alignments, new additions and sudden disappearances. Ideological expression has entered a phase of ultra-hybridity that demands, in parallel, an escalation of our deciphering interventions. What has changed? Adjacent and peripheral concepts always mutated faster than the ideological cores around which they revolve but they are increasingly bereft of their traditional anchoring points that provided the solidity and recognizability of the past.

There is another concern. With high-level ideological constructs the scholarly community comfortably emulated similar complexities of analysis.

But given the vernacular language in which ideologies are formulated that looks like overkill. We can't adopt or replicate that discourse, as would a political philosopher analyzing a weighty text. We can't employ as substantive ideological building blocks colloquial outpourings through impulse, private grievance, and self-publicity by internet. There is little point in exposing some of their inconsistencies because that is to take a sledgehammer to a nut. Instead, we present such texts as exhibits rather than as serious arguments, as the subject-matter close to the bone of how people think politically. We tend to abandon their ideational features in favour of what they might represent —as codes, or mentalities, or emotional states of mind. We would have to make way to different disciplines such as social psychology, discourse analysis, and communications theory, who tend to view "the political" through their own disciplinary lenses. They are all important knowledge enterprises that add insights to the pursuit of political understanding, but they are not at the heart of what political theorists do and enjoy doing. We are consequently removed, distant, uninvolved with, and unappreciative of, the soundbites of current ideological expression —few eureka moments or cerebral pleasure to be garnered there. Of course, it is important that bridges be encouraged and extended between all those fields, including empirical political science. But first and foremost, ideologies are types of political thinking.

If there is a way forward for ideology studies to cope with everyday thinking and expression, it must be this. We need to relax our focus on *conceptual concatenations* and switch our attention to *discursive patterns*. The methodology involved in the morphological approach to conceptual analysis can be adapted to include not only the pliant grids of spatial conceptual configurations but the fluid communicative arrays with which language circulates in a group[13]. Those patterns are subject to re-layering, they undergo continual cut-and-paste processes, they emanate from more than one location, they are no longer held in check by the high priests of a belief system, and they —like all forms of thinking politically in a society— vary greatly in intelligibility, gravitas, and format. Uncertainty, inconclusiveness, and contingency permanently populate political language and knowledge, at least as the inevitable backdrop to theorizing. That is the nature of ideologies —another reason why political philosophers don't take them seriously but students of political practices absolutely should.

Are, then, some of those patterns broadly prevailing, or do they appear as a precarious melee of rupture, overlap and secession? That depends on the epistemologies to which we subscribe, as well as to the size of the magnifying

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[13]   See Freeden (1996, 2013).

glasses we wield. And can they still serve as a path to major political decisions rather than safety-valves for private frustration or hubris? That depends on the cultural codes we deploy in navigating between individual and collective ends. To some extent, discourse analysis can play an important role here, except that it is overwhelmingly practised in critical mode, advocating a particular sensitivity to oppressive features of language that need to be eliminated, or at least mitigated. That, however, is not the task of ideology students who typically step back from advocacy, preferring to focus on the Weberian aim of *Verstehen* —exploring, interpreting, and understanding. To the extent that ideology studies make recommendations, they relate to refining the analytical tools at our disposal, not directly and substantively to improving the quality of human and social life. In that, they are no different than disciples such as history, linguistics, sociology, or anthropology.

IV.   SPACES AND SILENCES

There is another highly significant aspect of ideological fragmentation: the tendency to suture and to generalize as a way of making order in our thoughts, when all we have are disjunctured and piecemeal accounts of social reality. Here the issue is not restoring cohesion to a recently fissured or collapsed attempt at system and comprehensiveness, but the reverse: accepting the fragments as the default position, exploring the spaces in between, and finding out the purpose of those covering-ups or omissions. That requires a focus on the inaudible and invisible elements of ideologies that are particularly difficult to recover and piece together, yet always are crucial components. They all contain fractured parts: repetitions and disruptions, ponderous prose and staccato soundbites, simplifications and elaborations, vagueness and precision, caesuras and counterpoints. Amidst this congenital unevenness and in part due to it, there are frequent aspects that are quite normally obscured and inaccessible to their producers as well as their targeted audiences, and they differ from the deliberately suppressed features typical of totalitarian ideologies.

That means that a novel feature of political theory-cum-ideology is to turn its attention to conceptual and discursive gaps, to what is missing when one might expect it to be present. A fuller picture of political thought needs to incorporate what is significantly unsaid or hidden from the viewpoint of a querying mind, or from the perspective of the gaze of an external culture or discipline. Here the prevalence of silence as an integral constituent of political expression comes into focus. Deliberate and oppressive silencing are well-known phenomena. But beyond those, silence is a normal,

ubiquitous and indispensable element of political thinking, theory, and language. It both enables and constrains defining social practices, traditions, and currents —e.g. tacit consent on the one hand or cultural taboos involving political correctness on the other. Absence and lack are intrinsic to voice and performance, whether highlighted as part of a political account, glossed over to avoid distractions, or simply unnoticed assumptions that silently hold an argument, or a world view, together. Human narratives, including political ones, constantly weave through speech, sound, and silence —a phenomenon evident in the grammar, punctuation and rhetoric of oral and written communication, and subject to frequently repetitive rules that are themselves forms of political regulation, criss-crossed by disparate cultural interpretations of the political. For instance, hesitations, emphases, ceding place in a dialogue, or the conversational conventions required of different age and gender groups as well as those resisted by them, will differ from culture to culture. The ellipses employed by Harold Pinter to signify the petering out of sentences are often a form of miscommunication, but just as frequently charged with menace, a sinister political message. Pinter himself was often humorously disparaging about the interpretation given to the silences of his protagonists: "In The Birthday Party I employed a certain amount of dashes in the text, between phrases. In The Caretaker I cut out the dashes and used dots instead… The fact that in neither case could you hear the dots and dashes in the performance is beside the point. You can't fool the critics for long. They can tell a dot from a dash a mile off, even if they can hear neither"[14]. Those dots and dashes signify silence as disconnected, discontinuous, and non-organic, and politics as precarious.

First-order ideological discourses are peppered with silences that inadvertently conceal more significant messages that lie underneath. Disconnecting and linking are the natural rhythms of silences as they are of ideologies. They all call up sequences of commission and omission, either orderly or random. They all are eliminators as well as promoters and endorsers. But their silencing contributions may be due to quite distinct causes: the replacement role of narratives, when later historical accounts drown out earlier ones like a palimpsest; the epistemological overlooking of subjects that are irrelevant to, or unregistered by, the decontestations they adopt; or the introduction of specific themes in which silences are built into their ideational arsenal and play a substantive part, though not always in a form recognized by their creators and adherents.

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[14]   Pinter (1998: 20).

Let me take each of those three features in turn[15]. Ideologies are usually equipped with an historical account of their origins —or put differently— with attempts to control and shape time to their advantage. History is, of course, full of gaps and non-sequiturs, yet national stories seal them in order to justify paths to the present and the future, joining the pieces and inventing new ones, often quite unintentionally, and cementing a society firmly to its spatial and temporal environments. They are yet another instance of the futility of addressing the concept of ideology in the abstract when ideologies are palpably interwoven with, dependent on, and the function of, concrete events, happenings, and dispositions that permeate everyday life. Yet those manufactured continuities are in need of protection against their inevitable fragility. One common way of securing that is through the unquestioning acceptance of political practices, especially when the fabricated narrative changes so slowly it is impossible for members of a society to recall alternative identities. The Islamization and Christianization of much of Africa are striking examples of the overlaying of dramatically new cultural attributes —think of the ownership and pride Egyptians take in their largely cut-off and discontinuous pre-Muslim and pre-Arab Pharaonic past. Occupying a territory seems to permit access to whichever pasts one is ideologically inclined to resurrect, while shedding others.

As the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu put it strikingly, there is a consensus over traditions and practices because "what is essential *goes without saying because it comes without saying:* the tradition is silent, not least about itself as a tradition"[16]. The process of naturalizing a practice may involve replicating it to the point where it loses its salience and is performed mechanically or routinely —epitomized by the telling term "second nature". Politics has to navigate between the unnoticed and the unrecognized. Bourdieu's insight into the generalized, buried, and inadvertent legitimacy conferred on a society's practices as a whole fulfils, unrecognized, one of ideology's most important roles. Thus, the convention in liberal democracies that, when leaders lose elections, they step down rather than calling in riotous supporters is so ingrained that it is only when President Trump tried to hang on to power that it became an issue —and, unsurprisingly, it was too unexpected to generate an off-the-shelf ideological response that could quash it at the very outset. The democratic-constitutional ideology was in peril of disintegrating, under the substantive rejection of a unified and ingrained set of procedures.

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[15] For a more detailed discussion see Freeden (2022).
[16] Bourdieu (1977: 167-168).

Overlooking or superimposing voice is a second form of ideological silencing. The anti-pluralist and anti-democratic invoking of "the will of the people" permits any self-appointed "spokesperson" of that will to encapsulate it by inserting a private hypothetical voice into a postulated "unanimous" consensus that resists disaggregation. The catastrophic Brexit referendum of 2016 illustrates these steps of false chains of reasoning. 37% of the total registered electorate voted in favour of Brexit. That became 52% of those who actually voted and immediately was pronounced to be the will of the people. The part —often the small part— masquerades as the totality[17], its multiple voices ignored and delegitimized. Even non-populists frequently appeal to the "silent majority", who may or may not be consenting, acqui-escing, dissenting, or apathetic —but whatever it is to be, they are not a monolithic bloc. Ernesto Laclau identified a "logic of equivalence" typical of ideological thinking. It served to bunch together concepts and the practices they denoted, eliminating the significant spaces that place them in separate orbits of meaning. It occurs when different words are employed in contig-uous and recurring chains of partially substitute signifiers[18]. Phrases such as "law and order" or "truth and reconciliation" are apposite examples, tightly fusing disparate semantic fields.

A third form relates to the concealed role of silence in many ideological arguments. The relation between liberalism and neutrality serves as a pointer —a strong contender for one of the pillars of the liberal imaginary. The liberal state is frequently obligated to be neutral among different conceptions of the good[19]. The OED defines neutrality as "the state or condition of not being on any side; absence of decided views, feeling, or expression; indifference". But the concept of neutrality is intrinsically *non-neutral* in its ideological modes as well as a philosophical value. It works by letting in, endorsing, and protecting pronounced liberal values under the guise of standing above the fray in a silent indifference. The constitutional anchoring of the alleged acco-lade of depoliticized neutrality in the legal practices of institutions such as the U.S Supreme Court —emphasised by images of blind justice— draws a veil of silence over its dual political nature. To begin with, that eminently political body is appointed through clear political procedures, and it then goes on to deliver certain classes of decisions that directly reflect the ideological balance, or imbalance, of its composition, as can be seen in its 2022 overturning of the 1973 Roe v. Wade right to an abortion. Depoliticization and neutrality are

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[17]   Müller (2016).
[18]   Laclau (1996)
[19]   See inter alia Jones (1989: 9-38).

central weapons in the arsenal of political concealment, if often unintentionally so, and they are advanced under the guise of dispensing justice and exercising reflectiveness. In the more directly operational arena of politics, the notion of "holding the ring" with reference to setting out the boundaries of a boxing match, is a good illustration of a neutrality/silence treble move. The arbitrator is *neutral* (i.e. silent) about preferring one side or the other; the actual monitoring of the practice is *impartial* (in the OED sense of "freedom from prejudice or bias; fairness"); but that monitoring also simultaneously conceals the strong, *non-neutral*, value-laden preference for observing rules by means of the external regulation of the combatants. That latter interventionist practice is silently taken for granted. There is also the non-neutrality of permitting a person to be battered to a jelly by another!

It might appear that silences are available to be filled imaginatively or manipulatively. But the most intriguing political silences are the concealed and unrecognized ways through which silence pervades socio-political life. Like Conan Doyle's curious incident of the dog that didn't bark in the night[20], silence may be puzzling or disconcerting when sound, or voice, are anticipated. Those elusive silences can be anywhere and nowhere; they may come and go, re-emerging emphatically, or vanishing without trace like black holes swallowing up their own evidence: marginalizing, eradicating, superimposing. Here only the questioning observer might be able to provide the requisite distance. Crucially, that requires scholars to execute a decisive switch from solely listening *to* silence to also listening *for* silence: listening for the many silences that not only cannot be heard but cannot be meaningfully identified by the unwitting owners of such taciturnity, and that consequently cannot be broken by them. In such instances, silence adopts the guises of the unspeakable, the ineffable, the inarticulable, and the unconceptualizable. The voice of the student investigating silence must appeal to perspectives capable of connecting with the right language to translate muted experience and feelings into phrases.

By all accounts, silence is a precious ideological resource. It offers a seductive tabula rasa on which to chart a preferred and optional route to securing the political prerequisites of order, harmony, progress, and collective purpose. Because the contents of silence are not predetermined, it yields its apparent secrets in arbitrary and malleable form, which different ideologies will work to their advantage. Indeed, the order and harmony most ideologies seek in their separate idiosyncratic ways are just as frequently attained by removing knowledge or fantasy from the political agenda as by harnessing them to

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[20]   Conan Doyle (1894).

forge coherence —not by picking up the pieces in order to rearrange them but by brushing them under the carpet and then obscuring the carpet as well.

The realization of the ambiguous yet indispensable role of silence is the latest development in the fundamental reassessment of the nature and the actual manifestations of ideology as a living, shifting, and wholly malleable element at the heart of social existence. Through its continuous study we may gain invaluable and enduring insights into the changing yet crucial role of ideas in political life. But all the trends discussed here point to the centrifugal and centripetal forces within ideological morphology: the wholes and the parts, the latter increasingly splintering into pieces. The balance of precariousness and sturdiness by which ideologies are simultaneously imperilled and from which they draw, has become increasingly unstable.

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