MODERN POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES

THIRD EDITION

Andrew Vincent
To students past and present who have argued and disagreed
I have come to believe that the whole world is an enigma, a harmless enigma that is made terrible by our own mad attempt to interpret it as though it had an underlying truth. (Umberto Eco, *Foucault's Pendulum*)
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It is strange to come back to text which was written, in terms of the first edition, almost twenty years ago. It is rather like revisiting old photographs of oneself or one’s family. There is an odd mixture of discomfiture, delight and genuine historical curiosity. In returning to this text in 2008, it is remarkable just how many ideas, events, colleagues and even publishers and editors have come and gone in the intervening years. Some ideologies have quite markedly declined or changed; others have remained relatively static. Some components of particular ideologies which were quite central to political discussion in 1993 have subsequently dropped into the background. In the same period the study of ideology has expanded and developed in sophistication. There is now *The Journal of Political Ideologies*, which is an excellent academic supplement to both teaching and research work on ideologies. There has also been a great deal of scholarly work done on the concept of ideology itself and its role within political studies. In terms of the substantive chapters of this text, it is a somewhat poignant sign of the times that I have included, in this third edition, a new chapter on fundamentalism. This new chapter was difficult to write, not least because I had to enter, once again, into the spirit of the original text and the manner in which it was initially constructed. However, there are also many who would contend that fundamentalism is a deeply problematic concept for inclusion. However, contention and ideology are old bedfellows. I leave it to students of ideology to draw their own conclusions.

Overall, in terms of revision, I have retained the basic structure of the chapters. I have though worked carefully through the whole text and changed stylistic aspects. In some cases I have revised, added, excised or redrafted. In certain sections of the text I have left the basic prose as it was and only sharpened the language. In all the chapters I have updated the bibliography. Some ideologies have remained static; others show fairly wide ranging developments in the literature. Certain chapters made me pause much longer, particularly fascism, feminism and ecology. The key difficulty in dealing with change in the perception of an ideology is that one still has to say something about the way the ideas developed. One therefore cannot ignore prior ideological concerns. Thus it is important to try to gain some judgemental
balance in discussing the origin and development of the ideology, as well as integrating more current intellectual concerns. It is not an easy process.

In working on this third edition I have drawn upon the goodwill, advice and expertise of many academic friends and colleagues. I would like to thank particularly Michael Freeden for many years of friendship, collegiality and immensely fruitful conversations and critical insights into ideology and political theory. Further, thanks go to Andy Dobson, Roger Eatwell, Ian Fraser, Liz Frazer, Vince Geoghegan, Roger Griffin, Mathew Humphrey, Mike Kenny, Moya Lloyd, Noel O’Sullivan, Chris Pierson, Matt Sleat, Judith Squires, Jules Townsend and Rachael Vincent, for their kind advice, and in some cases reading of material. Thanks also to the long-suffering readers and editors from Wiley-Blackwell. The usual proviso applies here: none bear any responsibility for this final text except myself.

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This first chapter deals with three issues: first, a brief historical sketch of the concept of ideology will be presented; second, my own particular use of the concept of ideology is outlined; finally, and briefly, a synopsis of the structure of the book will be given.

This is not a book about the concept of ideology in its own right. It is a book about ideologies. However, it is impossible simply to leap into this task without saying something about the concept of ideology. The history of the concept of ideology is comparatively short – approximately two hundred years old – but complex. Like most substantive ‘ideologies’, the word ‘ideology’ dates from the French Revolution era of the 1790s. For the sake of brevity, the history will be broken down into a number of stages which have given rise to different senses. The discussion will begin with the inception of the word by the French philosopher Antoine Destutt de Tracy in the 1790s. It will move to Marx’s usage in the 1840s and the ambiguous Marxist legacy into the twentieth century, then turn to the uses of the term in the ‘end of ideology’ movement of the 1950s. Finally, some of the more recent debates will be summarized.

The term ‘ideology’ was first coined between 1796 and 1798 by Antoine Destutt de Tracy in papers read in instalments to the National Institute in Paris under the title *Mémoire sur la faculté de penser*. His book entitled *The Elements of Ideology* was published later (1800–15). To some extent it is true that Tracy would probably now be a fairly obscure figure but for his association with the word ‘ideology’. Oddly, there is no one unequivocal sense of the concept deriving from Tracy. In fact, four uses of the term can be discerned. First, there was Tracy’s original explicit use to designate a new empirical science of ideas; second, the term came to denote an affiliation to a form of secular liberal republicanism; third, it took on a pejorative connotation implying intellectual and practical sterility as well as dangerous radicalism; finally, and most tenuously, it came in a limited sphere to denote ‘political doctrine’ in general. All these four senses moved into political currency between 1800 and 1830.

The word ‘ideology’ was a neologism compounded from the Greek terms *eidos* and *logos*. It can be defined as a ‘science of ideas’. Tracy wanted a new term for a new science. He rejected the terms *métaphysique* and *psychologie* as inadequate.
For Tracy, the discipline of ‘metaphysics’ was misleading and discredited; ‘psychology’ also implied a science or knowledge of the soul, which could give a false, almost religious, impression. Tracy was both deeply anti-clerical and a materialist. Through the 1790s and early 1800s he was involved in bitter infighting with the Catholic Church, particularly over the control of education. Thus any term to describe his science had to be distinct from any taint of religion. It is also worth noting that the term ‘ideology’ more or less coincides with the early use of the term ‘social science’ (la science sociale). The latter term assumed, like ideology, an Enlightenment optimism in grasping and controlling, by reason, the laws governing social life for the greater happiness and improvement of human life.

Like many of the French Enlightenment philosophes and Encyclopaedist thinkers, Tracy believed that all areas of human experience, many of which had previously been examined in terms of theology, should now be examined by reason. The science of ideas was to investigate the natural origin of ideas. It proposed a precise knowledge of the causes of the generation of ideas from sensations. Innate ideas were rejected: ideas were all modified sensations. Tracy described ideology as a branch of zoology, indicating that the human intellect had a physiological basis. In the same rigorous empiricist vein as Bacon, Descartes, Newton, Lavoisier and Condillac, he proposed that the contents of such analyses should be carefully tabulated and detailed in terms of scientific procedures. Newton was particularly esteemed by Tracy. Tracy’s examination of the way in which ideas were generated, conceived and related to each other (in sum the ‘science of ideas’) might now be described as empirical psychology. In fact, one Tracy scholar remarks that he was a ‘methodological precursor of behaviouralist approaches to the human sciences’ (Head 1985, 4; see also Kennedy 1979; Head 1980). For Tracy, ideology was la théorie des théories. It was the queen of the sciences since it necessarily preceded all other sciences, which of necessity utilized ‘ideas’.

Tracy, and those who admired his work, believed that such a science of ideas could have an immense impact, on education particularly. If the origin of ideas was understood, then it could be used with great benefit in enlightened education. It could diagnose the roots of human ignorance. It was potentially the foundation for a rational progressive society. Tracy and others thus advocated vigorously the social, political and educative uses of ideology. Between 1799 and 1800, under the Directory, Tracy was appointed Councillor of Public Instruction and issued circulars to schools stressing the role of ‘ideology’ in the curriculum. There was also the attempt, as in Bentham, to establish a ‘science of legislation’. In pursuing these objectives, Tracy and the other idéologues became associated with a secular republican liberalism, stressing representative government by an enlightened elite. In this sense, ideology became, in the public perception, not so much an ‘empirical science’ as the political doctrine of a group of propertied liberal intellectuals. Hence, subtly, a second sense of ideology became prevalent – ideology became associated with a political doctrine, although of a very specific form.

Another lasting sense of the term ‘ideology’ derived from the political associations of Tracy and his compatriots. One of the early and brief honorary members of the idéologues was Napoleon Bonaparte. He appears to have had a stormy and ultimately
deeply hostile relation to the *idéologues*, later, when in power and pursuing his own autocratic ambitions, accusing them of fomenting political unrest. Bonaparte referred to them as individuals who wished to reform the world simply in their heads, armchair metaphysicians with little or no political acumen. He denounced them before the Council of State in February 1801 as ‘windbags’, who none the less were trying to undermine political authority. Once Bonaparte had re-established his credibility with the Catholic Church in a Concordat of 1802, he also predictably denounced the *idéologues* as a ‘College of Atheists’. Madame de Staël remarked at this time that Bonaparte seemed to suffer from ‘ideophobia’. This pejorative use of ideology – indicating intellectual sterility, practical ineptitude and, more particularly, dangerous political sentiments – tended to stick. The conservative, restoration and royalist circles in France focused critically on the *idéologues* in the latter use, denouncing the republication of Tracy’s *Elements* in 1829 as part of the attempt to overthrow ‘the ancient confraternity of throne and altar’. One final sense of the term began to glimmer through here. If ideology was partially divorced from the ‘science of ideas’ of Tracy, Condillac and the sensationalist school, and became associated, more importantly, with a political doctrine (secular liberal republicanism initially), it was but a short step to identifying the royalist critics as espousing another political doctrine, which could equally be described as an ‘ideology’. Ideology thus became, in a limited sphere in France, equivalent to ‘a political doctrine’. The other senses of ideology co-existed with this latter view.

It remains perennially puzzling as to why Marx chose to use the term ‘ideology’. In his early writings he alluded to Tracy in two senses. First, he noted, as a simple historical observation, the existence of a group of thinkers, namely, the *idéologues*. Tracy, as a key member of this group, is mentioned as a minor vulgar bourgeois liberal political economist. In consequence, there are passing references to the fourth volume of Tracy’s *Elements*, the *Traité d’économie politique*. Second, Marx employed the concept in the title of his early work, *The German Ideology* (1845) – unpublished during his lifetime – as a more pejorative label referring to those (particularly the Young Hegelian group) who ‘interpret’ the world philosophically, but do not appear to be able to change it. Marx might also have found some parallels between the Young Hegelians and Tracy, given the emphasis in both on ‘ideas’. Put loosely, Tracy’s thinking contained some suggestions of ‘idealist’ philosophy.

Marx was obviously aware of something of the initial use of the term ‘ideology’, indicating a science of ideas. However, he paid scant attention to this. The only sense he utilized, at first, was Bonaparte’s pejorative use.Crudely, he too considered the Young Hegelians as ‘windbags’ and armchair metaphysicians. In addition, he regarded both the *idéologues* and Hegelians as vulgar bourgeois liberals. This idea moves quite definitely away from the initial French royalist sense where the liberalism of the *idéologues* was regarded as a dangerous reforming radicalism.

Marx adds, though, in an unsystematic way, further dimensions to the meaning of the term, which take it into a different realm (see Seliger 1979; Parekh 1983). In Marx’s work, ideology denotes not only practical ineffectiveness but also illusion and loss of reality. More importantly, it becomes associated with the division of labour in society, with collective groups called classes, and most significantly with