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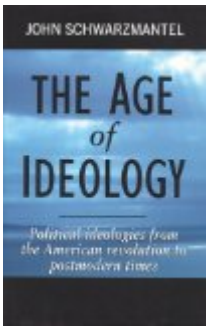
John Schwarzmantel. *The Age of Ideology: Political Ideologies from the American Revolution to Post-Modern Times.* New York: New York University Press, 1998. xii + 210 pp. $65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8147-8095-4.



Reviewed by David Rovinsky

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In any undergraduate survey of political ideologies, the course will invariably revolve around "the big three" ideologies of the modern world: liberalism, socialism, and conservatism. Political ideology, in the sense of a coherent diagnosis of social problems combined with a suggested plan for addressing them in the political arena, can trace its origins to the rise of liberal thought in the period leading to the collapse of the feudal system in early modern Europe. As feudalism receded, it was replaced with a nascent democratic political system and a capitalist economy, both justified through a liberal political creed advocating individual rights.

Yet liberalism was to prove to be only the beginning of ideology as a tool of political mobilization. The time since the Enlightenment, John Schwarzmantel argues, may be considered "The Age of Ideology," as political discourse throughout the West has been dominated by a series of great political projects of emancipation, all rooted in the principles of "modernity." Modernity refers to the intellectual legacy of the Enlightenment, and its enduring emphasis upon human reason and potential as a tool in the liberation and perfection of humankind. Schwarzmantel goes on to argue, as his central thesis, that this age of ideology is slowly drawing to a close at the end of the twentieth century. It is giving way to a new era of postmodern thought, characterized chiefly by skepticism of "grand narratives" and the insistence of the ideologies of modernity upon creating political projects in which all of society is meant to participate.

The ideologies of liberalism, socialism, and conservatism are all rooted in the assumptions of modernity, specifically, its belief that human rationality could reshape the world when it is directed to the pursuit of a political vision. Liberalism was the first ideology to meet this characteristic, as it called for a new social structure allowing for individual freedom, political equality, and a capitalist economic architecture. Liberalism very quickly aroused a conservative response, which, though it spoke in the language of modernity, rejected liberalism's belief in human rationality and perfectability. As a defensive ideology, conservatism has historically found itself adapting repeatedly

to liberal-inspired social change. On the other hand, the capitalist economic system promoted by liberalism encouraged socialism to develop. Socialism called for the liberal notion of political equality to be extended into the economic realm, and argued that economic inequality rendered individual freedom meaningless.

Though these three ideologies could entertain significant disagreements in regard to their political projects, the ideologies of modernity also shared several important aspects in common. For all three, political debate was first and foremost about material production. It assumed that this was the value around which society could be unified, and in response to which a universal political project would be constructed. Implicit in this line of thinking were the existence of a fairly homogeneous nation-state as the principal political community and a well-entrenched sense of class identity, especially among the working classes, in the case of socialism.

It has been over the second half of the twentieth century that the social bases of modernist ideologies have broken down. The experience of both the German and Soviet versions of totalitarian government discredited all forms of ideology, and led in the West to a desire for "pragmatic" government. Indeed, totalitarianism seemed to be the logical result of any kind of ideological movement. At the same time, Western societies, especially in light of the great post-World War II mass migrations, became more aware of their growing diversity and pluralism. In time, specific philosophies grew to articulate these new social conditions, and environmentalist, feminist, and multiculturalist thought began to compete with the traditional ideologies of modernity for adherents. At the same time, the globalization of the economy led to increased social atomization, as market pressures led to a reassertion of individualism over collective values.

As all of these developments undermined the myth of the politically conscious homogeneous nation-state, "post-modern" thought, as articulated by the likes of Lyotard and Foucault, offered the argument that individuals possessed multiple poles of identity, and that no single aspect of identity inherently outweighed any other. This jumble of cross-cutting identities called attention to the fact that post-1945 society was desperately complex, and that it therefore no longer lent itself to theoretical simplification ("the grand narrative") or universal political projects, such as those proferred by the ideologies of modernity. Instead, post-modernists defended particularity and social fragmentation. In so doing, they suggested that the very concept of ideology was too closely related to the discredited notion of the meta-narrative to have any further relevance.

While Schwarzmantel exhibits a certain sympathy for the premises of post-modern thought, he emphatically asserts that not only is ideology applicable to the post-modern era, the three ideologies of modernity themselves will be indispensable to its political life. If ideology were to disappear, writes Schwarzmantel, politics would be reduced to the pursuit of power for its own sake, instead of the pursuit of transcendant social goals. Ideologies have been essential for the organization of political argument in democracies, and they will continue to be so in the post-modern era. This is above all the case for liberalism, whose emphasis upon individual rights has always stood at the center of democratic thought. Thus, the central question is not necessarily whether ideology will disappear under post-modernism, as much as the degree to which the ideologies of modernity must mold their arguments to the exigencies of a new political culture constructed upon a post-modern base.

However, in encountering Schwarzmantel's perhaps simplistic call for some kind of a synthesis among the ideologies of modernism and the political demands of post-modernism, it is difficult not to wonder whether he has asked the right question but given it an incomplete answer. In

fact, political debate in the twenty-first century may well revolve around the modern/post-modern axis, and is indeed showing signs of already doing so. Schwarzmantel asserts that liberalism, socialism, and conservatism, the three ideologies of modernity, will all be relevant into the next century. In reality, the trend of the past thirty or so years has been for liberalism to absorb the other two. In the West, the writings of Hayek and Friedman hinted at the alliance between Lockean liberalism and Burkean conservatism that would emerge more fully in the governments of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. The experiences of Bill Clinton, Tony Blair, and other adherents of the vaguely social democratic "Third Way" suggest that the remnants of socialism in the post-Cold War West are also finding their way into this coalition. The "ideologies of modernity" may well be boiling down this liberal consensus, reflected by the arguments of those such as Fukuyama that ideological debate has effectively ended. This momentarily seems to be the case, but only if one restricts one's analysis to the modernist side of the debate.

The alleged triumph of liberalism is the offspring of the growth of the "New Economy" and "globalization" in the 1990s. Globalization seems to represent the liberal ideology taken to its natural conclusion. It suggests atomized (and geographically unattached) individuals selling and consuming goods, services, and skills in a single global market. It transcends national boundaries and other man-made barriers that previously served to curtail economic efficiency. At the same time, globalization has undermined the notion of community in numerous parts of the world, and is perceived in many countries to be an attack on identity and particularity (an idea explored more fully in Barber's *Jihad vs. McWorld*[1]). More and more, class warfare (a concept rooted in the premises of modernity) has given way to a struggle between the homogenizing market and particularity (an argument appealing to post-modernism). Opposition to liberal capitalism, formerly Marxist in inspiration, will more likely take the form of limits-to-growth environmentalism or Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful*[2]. Thus, while opposition to the free market might have in the past come from socialism, an ideology of modernity, future resistance may carry more of a post-modern veneer, as it questions the very premise that technological and material progress goes hand in hand with the perfection of human nature (something that Marxists do not meaningfully question).

The Age of Ideology is an important analysis that reminds us that the core division among ideologies is likely no longer the gap between liberalism and socialism. Rather, the split between ideologies rooted in modern and post-modern premises may well become even more important. Nevertheless, the level of the analysis is extremely advanced, making the book of dubious utility in first-year surverys of political ideologies. I have, however, used two chapters of the book in my junior-senior seminar in Contemporary Political Philosophy to introduce students to the contours of post-modern political thought, to some success.

Notes:

[1]. Barber, Benjamin R. *Jihad vs. McWorld*. New York: Times Books, 1995.

[2]. Schumacher, E. F. *Small Is Beautiful : Economics As If People Mattered*. New York: Harper Perennial, [1973] 1989.

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