**Overview of Ideologies**

The term ‘ideology’ was first coined in the French revolution in 1796 by Antoine Destutt de Tracy. It is the ‘science of ideas’. De Tracy believed it was possible to uncover the origins of ideas and from them discern ways in which we might achieve a ‘correct’ understanding of the political world.

However, ideology is not easy to define. According to Professor Terry Eagleton it has several possible meanings. These include:

1. A system of political beliefs
2. Action-orientated sets of beliefs
3. The ideas and beliefs of the ruling elite
4. Ideas which legitimate a dominant social power
5. Ideas which identify the place of an individual within the wider social context
6. Utopian thought
7. A way of making sense of the world

Ideologies are often understood to be a ***coherent*** set of values and beliefs. The ideas that they propose fit together. On this count, Fascism might not be regarded as an ideology, as some of its ideas are contradictory. The historian High Trevor-Roper described it as an ‘ill-assorted hodge-podge’ of ideas.

There are many different ideologies or political belief systems. These include communism, socialism, liberalism, conservatism, fascism, feminism, and, more recently, ecologism. So what do ideologies share in common?

Ideologies generally share five characteristics:

1. A view of the past and how society has emerged
2. A vision of the future and what society might look like if the right conditions prevail
3. A perspective on human nature
4. An understanding of the role of the state
5. A belief in how the economy might best be managed (for example by centralised state control or by a free market left to its own devices)

Each of these will be considered in turn.

**A view on the past:**

**Liberals** believe that the past demonstrates human progress; that the history of mankind is the history of social, political and scientific advancement. They therefore have an optimistic view of human progress.

**Conservatives** believe that the past can teach us lessons and that time-served institutions should be preserved. The very name ‘conservative’ suggests that they wish to preserve those institutions and practices which have served us well.

**Socialists** believe that the past charts the division of social classes and the consequent class struggle. The history of humankind has been a history of oppression, culminating in capitalism: an oppressive economic system which will be overthrown by socialism. Marx, particularly, shared the view that the history of mankind was the history of class struggle.

**Fascists** believe in a glorious past in which their people were dominant. Their mission is to reawaken that glorious past. For Mussolini this meant the reawakening of the Roman Empire and for Hitler the dawn of a new era of the Aryan people.

**A vision of the future:**

**Liberals** have an optimistic vision of the future in which the inexorable march of progress will ensure that there will be continuous improvements in our lives.

**Conservatives** have no blueprint for the future. They regard themselves as pragmatic, responding to the circumstances of the time. Any vision of the future will be flawed, because human nature and intellect is flawed. So they resist visionary ideological dogma in favour of pragmatism.

**Socialists** believe that they must fight to create a more egalitarian world where humans will live harmoniously and share the fruits of their labour.

**Fascists** believe that the future belongs to their nation or race, that their people will secure dominance in a new world order. They seek to revive past glories.

**Views on Human Nature/The State/The Economy:**

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ideology | Human Nature | The State | The Economy |
| Liberalism | **LIBERALS** view human nature as a set of innate qualities intrinsic to the individual, placing little or no emphasis in historical conditioning. Humans are self-seeking and largely self-reliant creatures; but they are also governed by reason and are capable of personal development, particularly through education. This is a generally optimistic view. | **LIBERALS** believe that in order for society to flourish the role of the state should be minimal. This is because mankind is rational and therefore individuals should be allowed to determine what is best for them. In doing so what is best for society as a whole will emerge (cf utilitarianism). Priority should be given to freedom. The ‘nightwatchman’ state is merely a natural arbiter amongst competing interests and groups in a society and a guarantee of social order. Classical Liberals support negative freedom: the absence of constraints (eg by the state) or freedom of choice. They treat the state as a necessary evil. Progressive Liberalism support positive freedom in the sense of personal development (education) and welfare. Progressive Liberals therefore see a greater role for the state than Classical Liberals. | **LIBERALS** believe in a *laissez faire* economy and free trade. The classical liberal economist, Adam Smith, suggested that there are unseen market forces which directs the economy and which are beyond human understanding. It would be wrong to interfere with these market forces and to try to control the economy.  Progressive liberals, however, support the idea of greater state regulation in the economy to ameliorate the worst excesses of capitalism. |
| Conservatism | **CONSERVATIVES** believe that human beings are essentially limited and self-seeking creatures, drawn to the known, the familiar and the tried and tested. Human rationality is unreliable and moral corruption is implicit in each human individual. Humankind is innately selfish and greedy (cf Thomas Hobbes: *“The life of man is… nasty, brutal and short,”* and also the notion of ‘original sin’). This is a pessimistic view of human nature.  The New Right (‘Thatcherism’), though, embraced self-seeking individualism. | **CONSERVATIVES** believe that society is naturally hierarchical and that inequality is deep rooted. Conservatives such as Burke accept a ‘natural hierarchy’ and have a strong belief in authority. To this extent the state exists to maintain law and order and for the defence of the realm. They link the state to the need to provide authority and discipline and to protect society from chaos and social disorder, hence their traditional preference for a strong state. However, whereas traditional conservatives support a pragmatic balance between the state and civil society, neoliberals have called for the state to be ‘rolled back’, as it threatens economic prosperity and is driven, essentially, by bureaucratic self-interest. | **CONSERVATIVES** have often supported the ideas of protectionism. However, there has always been a tension within the Conservative party over the acceptance of free trade. Under the influence of Hayek’s writings, neoliberal conservatives, such as Margaret Thatcher, have espoused a firm belief in free market economics. |
| Socialism | **SOCIALISTS** regard humans as essentially social creatures, their capacities and behaviour being shaped more by nurture than by nature, and particularly by creative labour. Their propensity for co-operation, sociability and rationality means that the prospects for human development and personal growth are considerable. This is an optimistic view of human nature. | **SOCIALISTS** have adopted contrasting views of the state. Marxists have stressed the link between the state and the class system, seeing it either as an instrument of class rule or as a cynical means of ameliorating class tensions. Other socialists, however, regard the state as an embodiment of the common good, and thus approve of interventionism in either its social democratic or state collectivist form. | **SOCIALISTS** believe in nationalisation or common ownership of the means of production. This was enshrined in the original Clause IV of the Labour Party Constitution, written by Sidney Webb in 1918. Attlee’s Labour government nationalised the ‘commanding heights of the economy’, key industries such as coal and steel and the public utilities.  However, social democrats, such as Tony Blair, have accepted free market capitalism. The Third Way economics embrace a mixed economy in which the private sector is used to finance and support the public sector. |
| Fascism | **FASCISTS** have a pessimistic view of human nature. They believe that people have no meaning outside the state. They reject individualism and believe that nations need a visionary leader who will rise above the herd and show the people their destiny. The masses are obedient and there is honour in self-sacrifice. Emotion is better than reason. | **FASCISTS** believe in the central importance of the state in all aspects of the lives of citizens. The distinction between public and private lives is not one that fascists would recognise. To Italian fascists the state gave meaning and purpose to its people. To the Nazis the state was a vessel for the advancement of the Aryan race. | **FASCISTS** believe in corporatism. This economic model proposes that the state, business organisations and the workers should all be working together for the good of the state. Corporatism was an economic model favoured in Mussolini’s Italy. |

**Marx’s view of Ideology**

The German-born philosopher, Karl Marx (1818-1883), shared a different view of ideology. Rather than see it as an objective science of ideas, Marx believed that ideologies were determined by the ruling elite. In his view, ideologies reflected the values of the society and the historical period in which they emerged. They were used by the elite to create a false view of the world (which he called ‘***false consciousness’***) and to subjugate the masses. Thus in the capitalist phase of history the masses are led to believe that competition is both necessary and healthy and that hard economic endeavour will be rewarded. Moreover, under capitalism the dominant religion (notably Calvinism and Methodism) ensures that people work hard, believing that they will get their reward in heaven. Idleness and sloth are regarded as evils which lead individuals into bad ways, hence the aphorism ‘the devil makes work for idle hands’. For Marx, therefore, ideology is the tool or the ruling class to supress the masses and ensure their continued dominance. It conceals the true nature of class contradictions within society.

There are numerous Marxist views on ideology but arguably the most significant is Gramsci:

**Gramsci’s view**

Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) believed that the dominant social class promoted an ideological consensus, or **‘hegemony’**, through political, social, religious and legal institutions. The dominant ideology provides stability in society and establishes consent by those being ruled for those who rule. It promotes the dominant values of the ruling elite as universal and these values become accepted by the masses.

However, Gramsci differs from the Traditional Marxist view of ideology in proposing the notion of ‘dual consciousnesses’. The proletariat are not only influenced by the ideas of the ruling class, they hold their own ideas. For example, the proletariat have a different perspective on poverty, unemployment and exploitation to the ruling class. They do not share the ruling class view that these features are the best way to run society. To this extent they are not blind to their own position, and are therefore capable of undermining the ruling class hegemony. This threat to the ruling class hegemony is most likely to happen in times of economic crisis when the condition of the poor is likely to be exacerbated. However, in order for a revolution to occur Gramsci argued that the proletariat required an intellectual vanguard who would be able to recognise the ruling class hegemony for what it is and bring the proletariat out of false consciousness by creating an opposing hegemony of ideas that would benefit all.

**Depictions of ideology**

Ideologies can be depicted in various ways. One of the earliest depictions was of a linear left-right spectrum:

Left Right

Communism Socialism Liberalism Conservatism Fascism

In the twentieth century the emergence of communism in the Soviet Union and Maoist China led some observers to suggest that the totalitarian nature of these states was akin to that experienced under fascist regimes. Indeed, the label ‘state fascism’ has been applied to Stalin’s regime in the Soviet Union. This led to the ‘horseshoe’ representation of ideologies, which emphasises the similarities between communist and fascist regimes as they emerged in the mid-twentieth century.

Communism Fascism

Socialism Conservatism

Liberalism

However, the emergence of ‘new’ ideologies in the late twentieth century and early twenty first century has produced a more complex picture which is less easy to describe in such a way. For example, feminism, ecologism, and religious fundamentalism do not fit easily into either of these models. These ideologies are often based on ideas that predate the twentieth century, but did not fully emerge until then. Moreover, they tend to be concerned with cultural rather than economic issues. The landscape of ideology, explored in the following chapters, has therefore become more complex in the twenty-first century.

**About this booklet**

This booklet explores in detail some of the key ideologies and political perspectives of the modern world. It examines their history, their key philosophers, their values and policies and considers their complex inter-relationship in the modern world.

**Further reading:**

Heywood, A., *Political Ideologies: An Introduction*, Palgrave Macmillan, (London, 1992) fourth edition 2007, Chapter 1.

Woodley, D., *Political Ideologies,* Philip Allan, (Oxford; 2009), Introduction.