Political ideologies

What is a political ideology? After looking in outline at three influential ideas that seek to define ideologies by what they do, I shall present in more detail one analysis that relates ideologies closely to their use of key political concepts. The material for this discussion comes from Michael Freeden's *Ideologies and Political Theories*, Chh. 1 and 2.

THREE VIEWS

Etymologically, ‘ideology’ simply means the study of ideas. But this use quickly became virtually irrelevant when Marx presented his account of ‘ideology’. He thought of ideology in the singular, and thought that ideology presented the truth about society ‘upside down’. It supposes that ideas determine what society is like – this is the core idea of all ideology. But in truth, it is the material conditions – the circumstances and arrangements within which we live, work, reproduce, who owns what, and so on – that determine the ideas that we have: ‘Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life…’ (*The German Ideology*). We have been misled into thinking otherwise by vested interests; ideology has been a production of the ruling class of each society, trying to justify and retain its position. It has hidden the truth, e.g. the dependency of the ruling class on the other classes that it has exploited.

The study of ideology since Marx has been heavily influenced by his conception. We understand the sources, limitations and imperfections of human thinking about societies; that the ideas of a society reflect its socio-economic practices is now virtually a truism; and Marx’s idea that ideas can conceal the truth and dissimulate misunderstandings is also widely accepted. But Marxism has been criticized for seeing only the bad side of ideology, for seeing it as the product of just one class, and for thinking that it was historically limited and would be transcended in the perfect state.

In the 1950s, a different model emerged. Philosophers now talked about ideologies rather than ideology. These were to be studied by a non-judgemental social science and classified, mostly along the left-right spectrum. The various purposes of ideologies and their contributions to society were noted, in particular ideologies were thought of as providing plans of action for the creation of public political institutions, of seeking to justify various political arrangements, and as binding individuals to society.

But another model also developed. Ideologies were seen as dogmatic, doctrinaire, abstract systems of thought, not attentive to reality. They were closed to the ideas and experiences of others. Philosophers who took this view argued that ideologies should be rejected in favour of more open, more democratic ways of thinking. But this view, like Marx’s, is overly simplified. These simple alternatives of ‘closed’ or ‘open’, ‘abstract’ or ‘practical’ doesn’t do justice to what ideologies are really like, which is often a bit of both; nor of the variations between ideologies.

Freeden asks what we can take from these theories. Looking at the historical and contemporary social realities of ideology, we can note that ideologies are attached to social groups, but not necessarily classes. They try to appeal to particular subsections of
society. They have a range of uses in politics and political discourse, including legitimating political institutions, integrating society, and providing guidance for political action. And for this reason, they are inevitably associated with power. Finally, they provide a picture of society, one that simplifies the complexities of social reality, but this is necessary in order to provide guidance in making political decisions.

WHAT IS AN IDEOLOGY?
But this doesn’t yet tell us just what an ideology is, only what it does or how it can be put to use politically. There is a different, and very productive approach to studying ideologies in terms of political concepts that developed Freeden developed in the 1990s. The central claim of this theory is that ideologies are different organizations of political concepts that give them particular meanings.

Political concepts, on this theory, are ideas that have, through historical usage, become quite complex. All political concepts have a number of components, e.g. equality has ideas of moral equality, economic equality, equality of opportunity, and so on. Different societies have understood and made use of the concept of equality in these different ways, and so these different understandings of what equality is are available to us today.

However, there isn’t one ‘right’ interpretation of the concept of equality. There are these different ways of understanding it. Philosophers and politicians will understand ‘equality’ differently depending on which aspects of equality they feel is more important; but also on how they understand these different components. A left-leaning liberal and a right-leaning conservative might both think that equality is most importantly equality of opportunity; but they might still understand equality of opportunity differently.

This is part of the idea of ‘essential contestability’. Political concepts are essentially (not accidentally) ones that people disagree over. This is partly, but only partly, because political concepts are evaluative concepts, i.e. they are concepts of things that people take to be values, such as equality, liberty, democracy, justice, and so on. People disagree over values, so they’ll disagree over how to understand these concepts. But they are also essentially contestable because of this structure of components which they have. These components have different possible descriptions, but people also disagree over which components the concept ‘ought’ to have. Finally, Marx was right to think that the way people understand these ideas will depend on other aspects of how their society functions. So the understanding of the concept changes in different circumstances.

Ideologies, then, are groups of such concepts, organized and understood in such a way as to make the interpretation of each concept support the others. Different ideologies make different political concepts central, e.g. liberalism places liberty, among other concepts, at its heart, socialism starts with community, among others. And so each ideology presents an understanding of political concepts that is selective. They ‘decontest’ the concept, which provides it with more determinate meaning, and this in turn allows it to be used in guiding political decisions and action. It is difficult to know what to if you have no further thoughts about liberty than that it requires some kind of absence of constraint; but if you understand the type of constraint that should be absent as physical coercion or coercion by strong social opinion, rather than individual psychological factors, this provides more guidance on the type of policies you should pursue.
AN EXAMPLE: MILL’S LIBERALISM

Freeden analyses Mill’s liberalism as follows. One might disagree with certain aspects of his analysis, e.g. how central the general welfare is and the place of happiness in the overall scheme. Freedon argues that Mill places liberty, individualism, and progress at the heart of his liberal ideology. He understands liberty as a freedom from constraint that individuals can enjoy, and he emphasises the importance of personal attributes (‘the only freedom that deserves the name is that of pursuing our own good in our own way’). It is because of individuality that liberty leads to progress (the different truths we know, the ‘experiments of living’ we conduct), and it is progress that helps to justify liberty and individuality (the connection to utilitarianism). It is these connections to individualism and progress that stop Mill’s idea of liberty tending towards ‘licence’ on the one hand (for licence doesn’t enable progress) and towards rationalism on the other (for that threatens individuality). And the connection to liberty and individualism stops progress from being the sort of historical determinism that one sees in Marx.

Around these three concepts, Mill places further concepts which provide further nuances to how he understands liberty, individualism and progress. He emphasises both the rational and the social nature of human beings, and both connecting to the general welfare, which also connects to progress. For Mill’s idea of utility is ‘in the largest sense’, appealing to the ‘progressive’ interests we have as human beings – in his eyes, as rational, social and individual beings. As his discussion of liberty makes clear, and his defence of it on grounds of individuality, he is particularly concerned with the control of state power as an interfering force in people’s lives. And although he advocates democracy, particularly on the basis of the benefits of participating in democracy (benefits to both individual and to social progress), he is concerned by the prospect of the ‘tyranny of the majority’ – so again decontesting democracy in the light of liberty and individualism.

Each of these concepts – liberty, individualism, progress, rationality, power, democracy – can be understood in different ways. Mill presents an interpretation of each them that interlocks with and supports the others, attempting to construct an appealing and persuasive whole. If we started in some other place, e.g. with community and equality, then we would reach different conclusions about liberty and individualism. Understanding ideologies as decontesting essentially contestable political concepts enables us to see not only the way they work, but also the way they differ from and overlap with one another.