

THE ENGLISH FACE OF IDEOLOGY

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The Modern Ideologies Series under the general editorship of

R.N. Berki and Noel O'Sullivan. London: J.M. Dent and Sons.

R.N. Berki, *Socialism* (1975); Noel O'Sullivan, *Conservatism* (1976); D.J. Manning, *Liberalism* (1976); John Charvet, *Feminism* (1982); Noel O'Sullivan, *Fascism* (1983); David Miller, *Anarchism* (1984).

Ideology presents many faces. In part, this is the result of a familiar modern predicament: in order to teach introductory courses we stifle our misgivings about a concept and so another generation of students learns about the 'isms' even as we privately wonder whether this ragbag of doctrines, movements and leaders has any unifying features at all. But there is a more important reason. Our misgivings themselves arise because 'ideology' is a concept over which there is such deep disagreement that it is perhaps misleading to talk of a single concept at all. It is not the least of the virtues of the Modern Ideologies Series that it can accommodate such disagreements, even acknowledge them, while still making a contribution to our understanding of particular ideological writings. The combination of a narrative history of movements and an analysis of doctrines is never less than competently handled by the five authors whose contributions have appeared intermittently over the last ten years. And yet the very affability of our guides — pausing here to introduce a new and unfamiliar face or there to bestow some characteristically discreet word of praise or reproof — gives the impression that it would be an irrelevance amounting almost to a *faux pas* to ask awkward questions about the sense of the enterprise as a whole. It is, indeed, in their epistemological agnosticism that these books best present the English face of ideology, but the time has come to consider whether agnosticism is a possible attitude to take.

"Modern Ideologies," we are told in the publisher's description, "is a series dealing with the most important social and political doctrines of our age. The chief emphasis is on analysis and internal criticism of the several ideologies discussed in the context of their historical development." The assumption, then, is that an ideology is a doctrine or group of related doctrines, albeit one which must be placed in a particular historical context to be properly understood. Again, the easy combination of narrative and "internal criticism" which this approach assumes is not unrelated to the "historical context" of the authors themselves. Four out of the five have been students or teachers at the London School of Economics during the

time when Michael Oakeshott and Elie Kedourie occupied chairs. The fifth, David Miller, in addition to being somewhat younger, comes from the Oxford of Sir Isaiah Berlin and the late John Plamenatz. Their treatment of ideologies as doctrines is clearly intimated in Oakeshott's pre-war collection *The Social and Political Doctrines of Contemporary Europe* and in Kedourie's influential study of *Nationalism* which begins by informing the reader that "Nationalism is a doctrine invented in Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century."¹

Now, there is nothing obviously wrong with treating ideology in this way, but two related questions are suggested. First, what are the proper criteria for assessing doctrines of this kind and, in particular, doesn't "internal criticism" in fact amount to treating the doctrines as theories independently of their historical context? Secondly, why do we want to call a doctrine ideological at all, why not simply call it a theory? Anyone who proposes to treat ideas as ideologies must have at least some sketch of an answer to both these questions however agnostic they wish to be on questions of epistemology.

The Modern Ideologies Series is especially interesting in this respect because none of the authors answers this second question — what makes a doctrine ideological — in the way which is probably most familiar to students of ideology. That is, none of them appeals to the idea of false consciousness. This, it seems to me, is one of the great strengths of the series as a whole because, in its less sophisticated versions at least, the false consciousness thesis has always promised a great deal more than it has been able to deliver. To identify ideology as false consciousness depends upon a careful specification of what a true consciousness would amount to. As Alasdair MacIntyre has noted, most false consciousness arguments, especially those which try to relate ideological distortion to the interests of dominant groups or classes, appeal to the idea of a science of society which could yield objective knowledge on the model of the natural sciences.² Some such datum of objective knowledge must be produced to make good the claim to be able to measure the distortion introduced by an ideological 'viewpoint'. For many reasons, social scientists have begun to doubt that the natural sciences could serve as a model, and other attempts to specify a neutral perspective from which an undistorted theory could be developed have not been notably successful. The Modern Ideologies Series loses nothing by passing over this approach.

But there is a more sophisticated version of the false consciousness argument, one less easily charged with what MacIntyre calls "epistemological self-righteousness." It begins from the assumptions that the most general form of a social theory is an answer to the question 'what is going on?' and that the answer will not be an explanation in terms of antecedent causal conditions and covering laws but an interpretation or redescription of agents' motives and intentions. On this view, ideology is a kind of low-level theorizing about the identities which we assume and attribute to others in conduct. Ideological beliefs are not necessarily false or self-interested, but they are nonetheless prone to be opaque, sometimes failing to reach even that minimal level of consistency necessary to realize our projects and goals. Perhaps they even impose goals which we find to be notably delusive or self-contradictory when, as agents, we fail to be sufficiently 'clairvoyant' about social identities. In sum, ideology is a species of low-level theorizing about identities and

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practices, indispensable but prone to self-interested breakdown.³ This more sophisticated view attempts to preserve the sense in which ideology is a distinctive kind of theorizing without setting up an unrealizable criterion to mark the distinction. With a little tidying up, I suspect that it is the best that can be offered in the way of a theory of ideology today.

Both Miller's study of anarchism and Berki's of socialism share something in common with the view that I have just set out. Studying anarchism as an ideology, Miller tells us in his preface, means studying "a set of beliefs about human nature, society and the state that attempts both to explain the world and to help change it." Unlike the other authors, Miller and Berki see nothing odd about the attempt to explain the world and to change it. Although he is not explicit on this point, Miller seems to assume that anarchist beliefs are principally explanations and that they are tested out in the experiences of anarchists. Thus his book is divided into two sections, one dealing with "the fundamental ideas of anarchism" and the other which "look(s) at how anarchists have attempted to bring about the transformation that they desire" (62). He concentrates particularly on the problems which anarchists have had reconciling their hostility to any form of coercive coordination with the necessary organizational preconditions for successful revolutionary actions against the modern state. Here is a very good example of a self-delusion which frustrates goals. But it is clear that, for Miller at least, it is not the delusive character of anarchist doctrine which makes it ideological: it is the project of explaining the world and changing it. And this remains true for the whole thesis about ideology which I have just outlined. It maintains that ideology is a kind of theorizing which is prone to become self-delusion but which need not in fact do so. It is the idea of a 'level' of theorizing which acts as a criterion for identifying ideology and, as such, the level must be carefully specified. Clearly, Miller and Berki think that ideology is a distinctive kind of theorizing because it aims at social and political change, but they pay no special attention to the difficulties that such 'practical theorizing' raises. In fact, both seem to think that the doctrines that they have described are simply explanatory in form, so that the practical successes and failure of anarchists and socialists provide dramatic confirmations and refutations of the explanations. The difference between ideology and other kinds of theorizing remains incompletely specified and we are left wondering why anarchism and socialism should be called ideologies at all.

In their different ways, Charvet, Manning and O'Sullivan are spared this particular difficulty because they do find something strange about the aspiration to explain the world and to change it. They begin from a conception of ideology which is to be found in some of Oakeshott's essays, particularly "Political Education" and "Rationalism in Politics." Since politics is a practical activity, the argument runs, the sort of knowledge that would prove immediately useful is practical skill acquired by political experience. A theoretical understanding or explanation of political life is not entirely useless, but it cannot stand on its own as a 'recipe' for action. As we all at some time discover, even cookery requires something more than an ignorant man, a cookery book and some ingredients. So where we find 'theories' apparently being employed in political practice, they must in fact be performing some other function, and Oakeshott mentions justification and the "abridgement"

of a tradition of political activity as examples. In O'Sullivan's work in particular this Oakeshottian perspective is coupled with the darker reflections of Kedourie, who dwells upon the corruption that politics undergoes when men of genuine skill are replaced by men of mere book-learning, apt to confuse politics with the pursuit of the millenium.⁴ For these authors, then, the question is: since ideology cannot be theory, what can it be? Is it merely the kind of nonsense one would expect from ignorant men masquerading as statesmen or does it have some genuine place in political life?

Charvet ducks the question entirely. He announces that he is interested in feminist doctrines, not in feminist movements nor in feminism as an ideology "whose worth is to be understood only in relation to the practical aims of the thinkers and their adherents" (1). In order to deal with feminist doctrines as "serious contributions to an understanding of the ethical basis of relations between men and women" we must remove them from the contaminating environment of practice altogether. This, it seems to me, is a perfectly defensible approach. The wonder of it is that the resulting book should be included in a series on modern ideologies.

O'Sullivan's books on *Conservatism* and *Fascism* constitute one of the most satisfying attempts to use Oakeshott's reflections on ideology as a basis for the analysis of particular ideologies. For O'Sullivan, an ideology consists of two parts, a philosophy or *Weltanschauung* on the one hand, and a distinctive style of political engagement on the other. In contrast to both Berki and Miller, he holds that the relation between these two parts is not that of theory to practice as commonly understood. Indeed, the preference for a particular style of political engagement is historically prior to its justification in doctrine. Thus the conservative preference for a limited style of politics, coming under attack after the French Revolution, was defended and justified by a "philosophy of imperfection" which is the heart of the conservative *Weltanschauung*. And we learn in *Fascism* that the activist style of politics which was one of the chief consequences of that revolution was ultimately taken up and justified by fascist doctrines of "permanent revolution . . . a cult of despotic leadership . . . and a highly theatrical form of state worship" (5). In no sense could the success or failure of the activity serve to refute or confirm the justifying doctrine.

This is an ingenious and robust scheme, particularly in its treatment of ideologies as traditions of thought and action, but it is not without its problems. If it provides a ready answer to the second of our questions — what makes a doctrine ideological — it is not so strong on the first of them — the part to be played by internal criticism of the doctrines themselves. If the doctrines function as justifications for a style of activity, what is there for criticism to do other than to note whether it was successful or not? So, far from being internal, such criticism must record the number of copies sold, the number of adherents gained, and so on. Of course, where dusk has already fallen, it might seem that judgements about the consequences of holding particular doctrines are in order.⁵ But a further assumption is still required because, on O'Sullivan's account, a doctrine can only be held to account for the consequences of the style of action it justifies if there is at least some connection between them which is not simply *ex post facto*. He does claim that fascist doctrine

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throws light on "the inner logic and structure of the new activist style of politics" (182) but exactly how it does so is not spelled out. What tends to go proxy for an explanation here is the general Oakeshott/Kedourie thesis that politics is a limited activity concerned with judgements about practical possibilities so that any doctrine that obscures this truth must be pernicious.

The most ambitious attempt to tackle the theoretical questions about the status of ideology remains Manning's *Liberalism*. He too accepts that, appearances notwithstanding, ideology cannot be a kind of social theory, 'low-level', debased or otherwise. He is adamant that there would be no point in setting out to describe or explain the world when the point is to change it, and he is happy with the consequence that the different ideologies are not in any sense competing explanations of an independent political 'reality': "each and every ideology is an independent way in which experience may be interpreted" (83). The real purpose of ideological "interpretation" is to bring the reader to accept an identity — to see himself as an Aryan or an individual or a proletarian — and the arguments used will be those judged most suitable for the occasion. In *Liberalism* at least, there is no very clear account of the role of these identities in politics. Manning maintains that they are no substitute for genuine political skill and makes the suggestion that they serve to identify friends and enemies.⁶

For Manning, then, ideology is a mode of argumentation designed to establish and sustain a political identity, but there is the additional suggestion that there is something rather suspect about it. Ideology "purports to present an objective view of human experience on the basis of which guidance is offered as to the correct form of future political conduct" (145). The significance of "purports" is not to act as a warning that the identities might prove delusive or incoherent. Rather it relates directly to the claim that an "objective view" could not possibly provide guidance in political life. In this respect, ideological argument is just a gigantic category mistake. For Manning, the internal criticism of liberalism amounts to pointing out how Locke, Mill, Spencer and Green imagined that they were drawing politically relevant conclusions from theoretical arguments. Since no such conclusions could possibly be established in this way, their arguments are not so much wrong as beside the point. This does not render them politically useless. Properly understood, Manning's liberals are to be seen using the prestige of theoretical modes to sustain the liberal identity in politics.

Certainly Manning does seem to have evaded the horns of the dilemma upon which all the other authors in the series find themselves impaled. If we treat ideology as a branch of political theory and subject it to internal criticism on that basis, we lose the sense in which an ideological doctrine is distinct from any other kind of doctrine. Why have a series on Modern Ideologies instead of one on Modern Political Ideas? If, on the other hand, we start out by claiming that ideology is not a kind of theorizing at all, then internal criticism seems quite the wrong way of appraising it. If ideology does not set out to give an explanation, why criticize ideologists for producing defective theories? When the idea of a political identity is fleshed out, Manning's approach begins to look very much like the account of ideology as low-level theorizing about the self-understandings we exhibit in politics. Political ideology becomes the discourse in which political identities are

established and criticized. The only obstacle to seeing what the critique of ideology entails is Manning's insistence that this sort of thinking is categorically distinct from anything that could be called 'theory'.

We recall that the objection to subsuming ideology under the general rubric of political theory and distinguishing it not by its propensity to error but by its 'level' or 'objective' rested on a reading of Oakeshott. No theory could serve as a guide to conduct independently of a practical skill or 'knowing one's way about' the practice in question. But it is clear that, while a political identity is certainly not premeditated independently of the practice of politics, an identity can be thought through and defended well or badly. The die-hard Oakeshottian may sniff at the resulting discourses as not 'really' theoretical at all and many examples are fairly risible, but a categorical distinction between theory and practice is not very helpful here.

One reason for this has been mentioned by Charles Taylor. He remarks that we live in a peculiarly "theory-prone" civilization,⁷ and examples are not difficult to find. Take a recent column in the *New York Times Magazine* in which Noel Perrin described his dismay when, confronted with the prospect of a "part-time marriage", he found that there was no theory to help him cope with it.

Although our society is even now witnessing de facto part-time arrangements, such as the couple who work in different cities and meet only on weekends, we have no theory of part-time marriage, at least no theory that has reached the general public. . . . To me it's clear that we need such a theory.⁸

Now, we may want to agree with the Oakeshottian that a man whose first thought in these circumstances is to run to the library for a book is already in deep trouble. And there is also something especially silly in Perrin's suspicion that there might be a theory not yet released to the general public, like a drug undergoing clinical tests. But we can recognize in his genuine distress a cry for a legitimating discourse, a plea that is related to the obscure satisfaction we sometimes find in knowing the medical name of an ailment.

In other words, our way of life seems to be intimating a new social identity for which we have no name and, as yet, no way of assessing whether the identity is being enacted well or badly. But this does not mean that discursive resources are entirely lacking. Even as Perrin writes, popular social science, disseminated in monthly magazines and 'self-help' books with their licensed hierarchies of therapists and counsellors, is coming to the rescue of a theory-prone civilization.⁹ If they are right, and such arrangements are becoming more common, we shall soon have the discursive resources to find our way around them as easily as more traditional households.

This relatively trivial example illustrates the major drawback of the treatment of ideologies as doctrines. Our authors' intellectual background renders them far too scrupulous as historians to endow ideologies with undue systematicity. In fact, they offer original and valuable guidance on how to establish the historical identity of an ideological tradition. But they all, to a greater or lesser degree, miss the sense in which the doctrines that they examine for internal consistency are the particular expressions of cultural productions, notably language. What else does it mean to

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have an identity or a self-understanding other than to have assumed a particular stance towards the cultural objects with which one is presented? If more people like Perrin demand that periods of separation be included within the concept 'marriage' then the concept will change to accommodate them and, in doing so, will reorganize a whole area of related concepts. However, this is not something that happens according to any arcane structural process. Whether and how the change will take place depends upon the 'stands' of people like Perrin and, to an even greater extent, the activities of those whom the discourse licenses to give an authoritative opinion. The discourse of public identities is the locus of ideologies and consequently the proper focus for the study of ideology is not so much doctrine, the finished work of cultural production, but the practices and processes of production itself. In shifting focus, we can finally displace the whole 'problem' of ideology from the barren ground of the theory/practice relation which caused Manning to stop short of seeing his 'identities' as anything more than rhetorical *personae*.

The treatment of ideology as practices of cultural production, which has motivated a whole range of interesting studies — on the analysis of discourse, on popular culture, or on symbol and myth, for example — is not without problems of its own. Is the extremely inclusive understanding of ideology as the discourse which produces public identities too vague? John B. Thompson has made a powerful case that specifically ideological discourse "serves to sustain relations of domination," and that too inclusive a definition only robs the concept of its "critical edge."¹⁰ But again, his emphasis is away from the finished product — belief systems, value judgements, doctrines — and towards the practices and processes of production, particularly linguistic practices. Disagreement over inclusive and exclusive definitions is part of the general 'tidying up' to which I referred earlier.

Set against these developments in the theory of ideology, *Modern Ideologies* is already looking rather dated. It is a meritorious and well-executed series suffering from what was once (before popular psychology moved on) called an identity crisis. The individual works in the series have strengths, notably in portraying the historical identities of traditions of discourse, which the more sociologically minded theorists of cultural production would do well not to overlook. We do indeed learn a great deal about some of the most important social and political doctrines of our age. We also learn much about people who called themselves liberals, socialists, anarchists, etc. But, apart from the fact that, for example, a man popularly known as a socialist advanced this particular doctrine, we learn about what made that doctrine ideological mainly by reading between the lines. And yet, when all this is said, one cannot help thinking that agnosticism presents a more agreeable face than self-righteousness.

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Notes

1. Michael Oakeshott, *The Social and Political Doctrines of Contemporary Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938); Elie Kedourie, *Nationalism* (London: Hutchinson, 1966), p. 9.

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2. Alasdair MacIntyre, "Ideology, Social Science, and Revolution," *Comparative Politics* (1973), pp. 321-3.
3. This account of ideology leans heavily upon some arguments of Charles Taylor, notably his "Political Theory and Practice," in Christopher Lloyd (ed.), *Social Theory and Political Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), and "The Use and Abuse of Theory," in Anthony Parel (ed.), *Ideology, Philosophy and Politics* (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1983); for an example of a study of an ideology conducted along these lines see John Dunn, *The Politics of Socialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).
4. *Fascism* is dedicated to "M.O. and E.K."
5. O'Sullivan does not always respect the condition of the owl of Minerva's flight: there are some very odd remarks on the "future of conservatism" in *Conservatism* (150-3). He is much more circumspect in discussing "Fascism and the Future" (183).
6. He has developed these ideas further in an important new book: D.J. Manning and T.J. Robinson, *The Place of Ideology in Political Life* (London: Croom Helm, 1985).
7. Taylor, "The Use and Abuse of Theory," p. 39.
8. Noel Perrin, "A Part-Time Marriage," *New York Times Magazine*, September 9, 1984, p. 122.
9. See, e.g., Stephanie Brush, "Love Stretchers," *Self*, September 1983, 118-21; Catherine Clifford, "Love at a Distance," *Self*, December 1983, pp. 88-91. *Self*, which scrupulously records the academic qualifications of the 'experts' cited in its articles, is an excellent example of a vehicle of cultural production in a "theory-prone" civilization.
10. John B. Thompson, *Studies in the Theory of Ideology* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), p. 4 and *passim*.