

# Ideology, Identity, and Post-Truth:

By Peter Marshall, PhD Political and Social Thought

Twitter: @PolTheoryPete

A significant division within the academic study of politics is the split between political theory and political science. This is not to say that one finds the other unhelpful or unimportant; political scientists often find themselves referencing Nussbaum, Butler, Mbembe, and others in their research. In turn, political theorists are very intertwined with their colleague's scientific methodology, either utilising it in their work, or drawing on scientific research in developing their theoretical concepts and political understanding. An interesting topic that both are interested in is the concept of ideology. Recently, political scientists have taken after the theorist Michael Freeden in understanding ideology as the way in which we structure (or 'map') how we make sense of and interact with the political. We can map out the morphology of any particular ideology, see its approximate shape, and note how it interacts and changes with political phenomenon. This kind of approach is popular in political science as it provides a way to conceptualise the complicated milieu of *thought* for empirical research into the *political*. Questions over whether we can classify populism as an ideology demonstrate this. It is no wonder that Andrew Heywood's (2012) introductory text to ideologies - which is classificatory in this way - is central to politics courses at A-level and for undergraduates across the UK. The ideological is something we can (approximately) measure and draw boundaries for; ideology is investigated through constituting it as a fixed identity.<sup>1</sup> After all, it makes no sense to identify a liberal as a liberal if we consider 'liberal' as conceptually *absolutely* fluid.



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However, to generalise in a rather crude way, this conceptualisation of ideology resists the broader trends of political theory. We may have found something similar in Antoine Destutt de Tracy's original understanding of the concept, namely that ideology (idea-ology; the science of ideas) would investigate the empirical basis of how good ideas emerged. Despite de Tracy's intended purpose, ideology was transformed into a much more

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<sup>1</sup> Freeden (2003, pp.2-3 and pp. 123-124) reminds us that for them ideology is not something to be observed from a neutral scientific vantage point, as we are all ideologically inclined and all ideologies contain "common sense". The ideological 'map' is not intentionally literal for Freeden.

pejorative concept, with Napoleon Bonaparte describing de Tracy and colleagues as “*mere ideologists* who had little knowledge of the practical world” (Williams, 1988, p.xi). Ideology became synonymous with political dogmatism about reality, often as a result of the structural arrangement of politics. In theoretical spaces, ideology has a very strong relationship with the concept of truth. We can see this in two of probably the most famous conceptualisations of ideology, those of Karl Marx and Slavoj Žižek. For Marx (1998), ideology acts as a force which inverts the relationship the working class have with material conditions. In other words, an ideology is produced which makes the working class think that real freedom, for example, emerges from developing a good concept of freedom. Instead, Marx argues that concepts depend on the arrangement of the material conditions. If a ruling economic class own the means of production, exploitation is hidden through creating a concept of freedom which lies to the working class about how they chose this state of affairs. Truth is distorted through ideology. If this is the case, Žižek (2008) wonders, how comes the working class (who must know about this manipulation by now) haven't overthrown capitalism? The truth that Žižek claims is often misunderstood in ideology is that political structures are constituted by an emptiness of identity, which produces antagonisms. The working class cannot fully understand the ruling class owing to an unbridgeable and indescribable difference between the two. This difference is antagonistic, as there can only be a localised and subjective understanding of these identities; therefore the difference puts each identity at odds with each other. Thus, ideology fills this lack of identity with a fantasy of unity and cohesion in order to hide the antagonism between the two. This is even the case if one knows that there is an important difference between the two, the ideological move is one of action rather than thought. Ideology is the participation in the distortion of the truth of this fundamental, ontological, lack. The working class might *think* there is corruption in the political elite for example, but they *act* as if this is an inevitable and unchangeable situation; the action is ideological.

A challenge to both of these kinds of ideology has been, unsurprisingly, the question of the ‘end of ideology’. In the 1960s Daniel Bell (2000) suggested that welfare state-ism signalled the end of ideology, and in the 1990s Francis Fukuyama (2012) suggested that neoliberalism signalled the end of ideological history.<sup>2</sup> Regardless of the (weak) legitimacy of these claims, it would be hard to argue that ideological politics has been dispersed. In both Bell and Fukuyama, an ideological position has been staked and claimed as the final political ground, but as we have undoubtedly seen ideologies still play a role in politics, locally, regionally, or globally. As any student of Žižek would say, this claim to an end to meaningful political difference is one of the most ideological; it is the depoliticisation of politics. If we are to find a more existential challenge to the importance of ideology, we should look to works

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<sup>2</sup> Might we find another popular claim to the end of ideology in the 2020s?

which challenge *any* claim to a (will to) truth to identity, such as in the works of Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze.<sup>3</sup> These philosophers challenge the notion that ideology is useful as a concept owing to the fluidity of a true, identifiable, belief. Identities are, for both these theorists, socially constructed through historically contingent institutions. To talk about a 'liberal', or 'socialist', is to claim an impossible transcendental unity of identity across time, when different events, politics, and publics constitute this local identity.<sup>4</sup>

A fundamental disagreement with this poststructuralist critique of ideology has led to contemporary discussion labelling this kind of philosophy as a foundation of post-truth politics.<sup>5</sup> The abandonment of truth has given demagogue politicians power, as they no longer are challenged by the empirical facts they were once held to account by. We have supposedly returned to something of a super-ideological state. Outside of a general scepticism of this valorisation of previous historical accountability (let us consider how often Tony Blair is uncritically brought onto TV despite his absolute certainty about the WMDs in Iraq which never manifested), it is interesting to note that politicians that are often identified as post-truth (Trump, Johnson, Bolsonaro, etc.) heavily emphasise the importance of truth in their own politics. Trump calls those critical of him 'fake news', clearly telling his supporters that the truth of the world is to be found in him rather than in CNN or Joe Biden. The critique that Foucault and Deleuze make is that it is problematic to centre a certainty of truth within politics, owing to how any truth claim cannot encapsulate the abundance of difference that it is trying to capture. Trump replicates this problem in an incredibly overt way. Truth is constructed by a political belief system (i.e. Trumpism), but unlike in Freeden we do not need to claim that this system is a relatively stable or coherent one. Trumpism shows in the extreme that the belief system can be wildly fluid, all whilst claiming a fixed ideological identity. What I am arguing is important for ideology studies is seeing ideology as a force through which political actors produce identities and regimes of truth. In other words, the question of ideology needs to become one of how ideologies produce political relationships of truth, rather than how politicians use ideology to hide from the truth.

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<sup>3</sup> In particular, see Foucault's (1980) 'Truth and Power' and Deleuze's (2007) 'Desire & Pleasure'.

<sup>4</sup> For valuable critiques of this philosophy in favour of identity, see Spivak, 1988, McNay, 2007, and Rosenow, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Pomerantsev, 2017

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