



Ideology: A Very Short Introduction

Michael Freeden

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This book, though physically small, is large in intellectual stature. It aims to reclaim the study of ideology for the discipline of politics. Freeden considers that politics is the most apposite ‘stamping ground’ for ideological discussion. The book, in summary, contains a masterly summary of the career of the concept of ideology from its first usage by Destutt de Tracy, in the early 1800s, through Marx, Mannheim, Gramsci, Althusser, and many others, up to the discourse theory of the last decade. For students of politics or lay readers wishing to know about ideology, one could not wish for a better text. It is a splendid model of concision and clarity, which manages, in a short compass, to cover all the key issues one would want in terms of the history of the concept. However, one should not be misled into thinking that this is simply an introductory survey. For the careful reader, there are much deeper themes, which not only summarize a unique position on the discussion of ideology, but also lay out the groundwork for a fruitful research programme. Many of these themes, sketched in the present volume, have evolved from Freeden’s earlier comprehensive study *Ideologies and Political Theory* (1996).

For Freeden, overall, ideologies are cognitive maps that chart crucial dimensions of the political world. Wittingly or not, we all possess these maps. They are the prose of the political world. They do not represent any objective external reality, rather they enable us to make sense of the political world and navigate its waters. Ideologies are thus seen to constitute sustainable patterns of thought-behaviour. Without such maps we remain ‘clueless’ in politics. The study of ideology, at a basic level, entails decoding these complex cognitive maps. The idea of the map here owes a lot to the work of Clifford Geertz and his grounding breaking work on cultural symbols.

Another important aspect of Freeden’s approach is his claim that all ideologies contain a core of concepts, which enable a clear identification of the doctrine. Each ideology is seen to decontest these core concepts in its own idiosyncratic way, providing a set of stable meanings for its votaries. The same core themes can, of course, be ‘reassembled’ in a wholly dissimilar order, and decontested in different ways, within the core of another ideology. Thus, for example, a number of distinct ideologies speak of ‘liberty’ as a core value.



Liberty itself remains essentially contested and will often be interpreted in distinct ways. Liberty can thus be a core concept for diametrically opposed ideologies. On another count, the 'same' interpretation of a concept may be used in different ideologies. In other words, conceptual use can directly overlap between ideologies. Concepts arise and function within interpretative frameworks. Freedon, in fact, compares political ideologies, at one point, to modular units of furniture, which can be (re)assembled in different ways or shapes. Outside of these core concepts are a range of more peripheral and adjacent concepts, which are discussed within ideologies, but are not necessarily crucial to their continuance.

Freedon categorizes his approach to ideologies as a 'conceptual morphology'. This concentrates on the ideational configuration of ideologies themselves. An ideology is viewed as human thought-behaviour, embodied in both ordinary spoken and written language, enabling individuals to decontest meanings, forestall arguments, plot a course through the political world and influence public decision-making, usually through political parties, or the like. Ideologies inevitably compete over the political world and the control of political language. Freedon also acknowledges the need within most ideologies for occasional vagueness. Ideologies thus contain an odd mixture of emotion and reason, vagueness and occasionally flawed rationality. Ideologies are, in effect, political thought in actual practice. This reading of political ideas sets Freedon's approach on a collision course with one hegemonic reading — certainly over the last 50 years — of political philosophy. For Freedon, ideology regularly contains, but is not the same as, the work of political philosophers. Both ideology and political philosophy appear as sub-categories within the broad practice of political theory. He contends that an over-emphasis, in much political philosophy, on synchronic abstracted reason can lead to a professional academic language, which bears little or no relation to politics, as perceived and used by the mass of ordinary citizens. Freedon adopts a more ecumenical understanding here, allowing both practices to coexist with mutual tolerance. However, he does see his task as recapturing the important role of ideology within political theory, a role that was widely misconceived throughout the bulk of the 20th century.

If I had one anxiety here it relates to the question of the reach of ideology. In other words, what is and what is not ideological? Freedon's argument stresses, at points, that there is much that is not ideological. He is adamant that ideology has limits, insisting that ideology only deals with the realm of the political. However, the thrust of his book has already indicated (at points) that the 'political' cannot be formed independently of the ideological. Thus, to use the political as a way of delimiting the ideological seems to be theoretically problematic. Where does ideology begin and end? However, pushing this issue to one side, overall, this is an excellent little book that provides the best



introduction available to the 'concept of ideology'. It is to be highly recommended.

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