Understanding “Ideology”: It’s Aspects, Features, Dimensions and Types

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Abstract— Ideology is a key subject of inquiry for the scholars of political science, media studies, sociology, philosophy and other disciplines of Social Sciences. It is excessively used in interpretation, formulation and functioning of many state’s political systems. Yet, the literature on the concept of ideology seems wanting in content and analyses. Ideology has been ascribed as something that the ‘other’ nation are afflicted with. It was a concept that was associated with Germany and Italy during the Second World War and USSR in the Cold War in the last century. And it was also the reason why ideology had acquired much literature during these tumultuous times. But ideology as a concept needs scrutiny which is the aim of this paper. The paper argues that no state in the international system functions without the influence of some significant ideology, whether it be United States of America or Uganda. It also argues that all nations in the international system utilize and operate on some sort of ideology. It also attempts to differentiate between political, economic and moral ideologies. The paper goes on to capture the various aspects, features and dimensions of the term ideology.

Keywords—Ideology, International System, states, foreign policy.

I. INTRODUCTION

Ideology is a contentious subject of study. Michael H. Hunt has gone as far as to describe it, in his book, Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy as a ‘slippery’ subject, for it is not easy to grasp or comprehend it in its entirety. It has been variously described and defined as well as celebrated and criticized. It has remained a subject of interest within the academia through the centuries with its share of highs and lows, sometimes taking the center stage and sometimes shrouded in shadows. Yet it has always made its presence felt, making its appearance at intervals due to its staunch habit of resurfacing. One scholar goes as far as to claim that ideology like history and politics, “has a habit of coming back.” It has received most attention during the French revolution and the Cold War with disdain shown amply also during the Second World War. During the upheaval of the French Revolution, the concept of ‘ideology’ had its genesis. Destutt de Tracy used the term ideology in 1797 to refer to a ‘science of ideas.’ But since then its meaning has undergone tremendous transformation mostly acquiring negative connotations. It received undeniable attention from the academic during three important landmarks in history: during Second World War, Cold War and post-Cold War. The Second World War was fought to terminate the widely spreading tentacles of influential ideologies: from Fascism in Italy to Nazism of Germany. These ideologies posed a threat to peace in Europe and were proving to be the source of constant aggression in the region. Socialism touched its apex under Soviet Union’s supervision in the Cold War. It guided not just the domestic policy of Russia, but also its foreign policy which had larger implications for the world. And in recent times, ideology has been recalled also to comprehend the actions and foreign policy of President George W. Bush’s administration in post-Cold War period.

Ideology has been a field of inquiry for the political scientists and international relations scholars and also a key concept for the sociologists, media studies scholars and women studies scholars to name a few disciplines studying it. Within political science, political theory analysts pay attention to the role of ideology in workings of a state. As an influential factor in study of domestic and foreign policies, scholars of post-positivist theories like social constructivism study ideology as part of the social makeup of that society that molds foreign policy decisions. Also, foreign policy analysts study the working of ideology in foreign policies of states. In short, it is a concept that has wide scholarship.

Yet, due to its ambiguity it hasn’t been given attention as a concept, independent of its influential role on domestic or foreign policy of various states. The aim of this paper is to understand the various aspects and characteristics of ideology as a concept. It will not deal exclusively with any one ideology or attempt linking any particular ideology with domestic or foreign policy of a state. There are already many such studies and literature available but in order to comprehend ideology, the concept, this paper argues, it is pertinent to dissect which will be attempted in the following sections.

II. IDEOLOGY: THE CONCEPT

Ideology as a concept as has been previously mentioned was first defined during the French Revolution to mean ‘science of ideas.’ And when the term ideology was used it referred to political ideology. Since then it has acquired a notorious and pejorative reputation. It went from being a science of ideas to be recognized as the “opposite of truth, science, rationality, objectivity and philosophy”; dogmatic, doctrinaire, repressive and extreme or simply ‘false’. “It signifies beliefs and doctrines which are either dogmas beyond reach of criticism or cloaks for individuals and group interests.”

It went on to being heavily criticized not just by the liberals but also Marxists. Liberals like Karl Popper and Daniel Bell are critical (in fact some like Talcott Parsons and
Michael Oakeshott condemn it) of ideology for being ‘closed’ systems of political thought that claim ‘monopoly of truth’ and seek to explain everything while at the same to refusing “to tolerate rival views or opposing theories.” It has been described as ‘secular religion’ which leads to “intolerance, censorship and political repression.” It was written off by Karl Marx for its negative and critical meaning: ideology “distorted, indeed inverted, reality,” while ideas like his own were ‘scientific’ that “uncovered the contradictions of society.”

Ideology also acquired positive meaning when Marxists, like Lenin and Gramsci “developed a positive conception of ideology: sets of ideas that served the interests of particular social classes.” (Andrew Heywood, 1992:7).

But the ultimate denunciation of ideology was when it became fashionable to bury ideology and declare it at an end at the end of Cold War when Francis Fukuyama revealed in The End of History and the Last Man (1992) by arguing that human ideological evolution had reached its end point, for Western liberal democracy was the final form of human Government. With this also came the lack of academic interest in ideology and scholarship on it dwindled. But like Andrew Heywood argues, “ideology like history politics has a habit of coming back.” The interest in it has revived especially since Social Constructivism and other such similar theories and approaches have strenuously emphasized the role of ideas, ideology, norms and social fabric in foreign and domestic policy. It has also gained focus due to the neo-conservative turn American Foreign Policy has taken under George W. Bush’s administration.

III. ASPECTS OF IDEOLOGY

However radical or ethical or liberal or revolutionery the ideology is, it has three major aspects namely,

- An ideology gives ideas and concepts in order to explain the existing reality;
- An ideology offers a critique of the existing (popular) ideology and
- It proposes a path forward. i.e., a manifesto to be followed in order to achieve the desired goal in the future that has been identified by the ideology itself.

Any ideology has its own terminology: its paraphernalia that is unique to itself. The terms which may mean different things in ordinary English language, acquire different meanings as part of the terminology of that particular ideology. These terms become inherent part of that ideology which are basically certain ideas and concepts used to elaborate the ills/flaws of the present system, decide upon a course of action for its rectification and achieve the desired/celebrated objective/end. One such example is of Marxism. Karl Marx for one distrusted the term ideology for its pejorative ability to distort reality and may have been agonized when his own philosophy acquired an ideological twist to become Marxism. Marxism is majorly a political ideology that understands the world system from an economic lens where the two classes, the privileged Bourgeois and the oppressed proletariat are in constant conflict. The course of action proposed is one of revolution; overthrowing and replacing the existing social order is advocated.

IV. FEATURES OF IDEOLOGY

The Western ideological traditions originated in French and American revolutions of the 18th century. And political ideology emerged in early 19th century. From being a ‘science of ideas,’ it has acquired any number of attributes, meanings, characteristics and nature since then. It has come to be viewed as a system of ideas that help in comprehending the reality around. Individuals have some abstract view of how the world works and how individuals and governments should act within this frame. In other words, it is believed to give a world view. It acts as a pair of coloured lenses of a goggles through which reality is viewed. Each coloured pair gives different source/version for viewing/examining/making sense of the reality around. While one may take into account economic inequalities, the other may consider racial superiority and so on. To elaborate, Michael Hunt’s definition of ideology in his book, Ideology and Foreign Policy, is of significance, “an interrelated set of convictions or assumptions that reduces the complexities of a particular slice of reality to easily comprehensible terms and suggests appropriate ways of dealing with that reality”.

But in spite of these different versions of reality, there are certain common features in almost all the ideologies. For example whatever consideration an ideology takes as a starting point, that base or foundation of the ideology directs the adherents of the ideology towards an ambitious and aspired target or goal to change that reality. It will also list out the course of action to be taken or followed for attaining that goal. In the case of the Nazist ideology, racial superiority of the Aryans was the base on which the extermination of Jews and other races was called for, in order to cleanse the society.

Some of the features of Ideology are:

- Provides Worldview: help to structure how the world is understood and explained
- A system of beliefs, normative values, attitudes and symbols that guide collective action
- Advocates a particular pattern of social relationships and arrangements,
- Justifies a particular pattern of conduct (which its proponents seek to promote, realize, pursue or maintain)
- Source for ordering, defining and evaluating political reality
- Establishes political identities
- Gives meaning: in identifying friends and foes in the international system
- Propels social machinery into action for change
- Provides/motivates a course of action (sometimes even a revolution to overthrow and replace the existing social order)
- Presents/Establishes a normative goal (‘what ought to be’) as antithesis of present scenario and orders preferences

V. TYPES OF IDEOLOGIES

There are not just political ideologies though they are most frequently studied and quoted in the academia. There are also
moral/ethical ideologies, economic ideologies, religious ideologies and regional ideologies. There are also non-Western ethnic/regional/local/religious/national ideologies. These are areas of research where further research can be carried out but are not the concern of the present paper.

Political ideologies are a concern of political scientists and hence also of this paper. Most familiar and established method of categorizing and relating them is the Left-Right spectrum. On a linear spectrum from Left to Right the most accepted political ideologies are located as follows: “communism-socialism-liberalism-conservatism-fascism.” The terms ‘Right’ and ‘Left’ also has its origins in the French Revolution. The aristocrats who sat on the right of the King were his supporters and the ones that sat on the left were radicals, members of the Third Estate. This seating pattern was followed in subsequent French assemblies which led to general understanding that the ‘right’ meant reactionary or monarchist and the ‘left’ was used for “revolutionary deputies or those who held egalitarian views.” And this is how the terms ‘Right’ or ‘Left’ came to be associated with the ideological bend of mind.

**Some Popular Political Ideologies:**

Political Ideologies being the concern of this paper, some of the most popular political ideologies are: Liberalism, Conservatism, Socialism, Anarchism, Communism, Nationalism, Democracy, Environmentalism, Feminism, Nazism and Fascism.

Among these ideologies there are many variants of particular ideologies depending upon the placement of the supporters and scholars of the ideology on the scale from Left to the Right with Center in between. As an illustration, Socialism has many variants ranging from the general Socialism to Libertarian Socialism and from Religious Socialism to Revolutionary Socialism that includes Marxism and Anarchist Communism. Similarly, religious ideologies like Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism etc. each have many more classifications like Buddhist Anarchism, Hindu Nationalism, Christian Anarchism etc.

**VI. DIMENSIONS OF IDEOLOGY**

As one scholar stated, “Politics of modern world is shaped by key ideological traditions.” And political ideologies are deeply rooted in modern cultures. They are difficult “to manage and maybe impossible for anyone to escape its impact.” Ideology is a product of a wide range of factors, including core values, individual traits, fundamental beliefs, and environmental factors.

Second dimension of ideology is that it provides certain interrelated concepts ideas and worldviews that seek to explain social realities nationally and internationally.

Thirdly, Ideological elements put some constraints on the choice of policy options. For example, under no circumstances the American foreign policy can be geared to promote socialism worldwide. Similarly, former Soviet Union could never promote capitalism worldwide as a focus of foreign policy. Fascists and Nazis cannot promote democracy as a goal of foreign policy. In this sense ideology can serve as a constraint. It can also help promote a set of foreign policy preferences at a given point of time and clime.

Fourth, it produced newer literature on various dimensions of both the failed and successful ideologies for it has always been “subjected to fierce political debates.” It has been charged with notions like “Ideas and ideologies are simply ‘window dressing’ used to conceal the deeper realities of political life.” But whatever the charge against it, there has been ideologies that have worked/failed in the last century like Nazism, Fascism, Socialism and there are some that have thrived in the last decade namely, democracy, neo-conservatism, religious fundamentalism and developmentalism. Some of them have been written off already like Developmentalism. “The ideology of Development should be packed up in crates and sent off to the Museum of Dead Ideologies, just down the hall from Communism, Socialism, and Fascism.” There are some studies that are being carried on the role of ideology on process of intervention in foreign policy. And the two dimensions of ideology that play a role in the intervention context have been recognized as the militant dimension and the cooperative dimension. “The militant dimension will structure preferences around security oriented events where the cooperative dimension will structure around humanitarian oriented events.”

**VII. INFLUENCE OF IDEOLOGY**

It is noteworthy that ideologies subordinate the national to the international and sometimes the international to the national. It depends on the ideologies orientation: whether it is inward looking or outward looking. Not all ideologies are nationalistically driven. Some have international agenda to be fulfilled and some ideologies have national objectives that hover over the international. For example, Fascism and Nationalism subordinate the international to the national society. Let us look at the influence of ideology on domestic policy.

**1. On Domestic Policy:**

Political ideologies are known to act as a form of social cement whereby they provide social groups and in fact whole societies with a set of unifying beliefs and values. They can succeed in binding together divergent groups and classes within a society. “…they strengthen a sense of community. Furthermore, appeals to common values and beliefs prevailing in a society can be useful in arousing the public to the support of policies.” Some scholars have gone so far as to accord the purpose of maintaining society to ideology. And the function of an ideology, it has been argued “is for a man to come to terms with his world and to serve as a guide for his behavior.” Different political ideologies have an appeal to different sections/social classes of society. For example, Andrew Heywood argues, Liberalism has an appeal to different sections/social classes of society. For example, Andrew Heywood argues, Liberalism has an appeal to different sections/social classes of society. For example, Andrew Heywood argues, Liberalism has an appeal to different sections/social classes of society. For example, Andrew Heywood argues, Liberalism has an appeal to different sections/social classes of society. For example, Andrew Heywood argues, Liberalism has an appeal to different sections/social classes of society.

**2. On Foreign Policy:**

Even though the influence of ideology on foreign policy has been studied during the Cold War in Soviet Union’s context, there is a rise in recent times, of scholarship advocating the influence of ideology on foreign policy. It has
led to the emergence of newer studies that are attempting to understand and argue for a Foreign Policy Ideology. Nicolas Martini defines a foreign policy ideology “as an individual’s general theory of how the international environment works, and how governments should act within this international framework. A foreign policy ideology should provide an individual with a lens on how he or she should perceive international events. This ideology should also aid the individual in the formation of more specific policy prescriptions to address these events.” Foreign policy it has been emphasized should be more ideological, according to some scholars like Richard S. Grossman. Hence, it can be concluded in Hunt’s words that “Ideologies are important because they constitute the framework in which policymakers deal with specific issues and in which the attentive public understands those issues.” (Hunt 1987, 16).

In conclusion, the paper attempted to deal with the concept of ideology defining it and explaining its aspects, dimensions, types and its influences on domestic and foreign policy of states.

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REFERENCES


