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Ashcraft's Problem of Ideology

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How should we do political theory: as political philosophy, history, or ideology; as political science or practice? Now is another stock-taking time for political theorists, with versions of this question very much on many minds. Since this is the key issue addressed by Richard Ashcraft in "Political Theory and the Problem of Ideology,"¹ that essay is bound to spur controversy. Some of Ashcraft's criticisms can be accepted, and the spirit of his alternatives for political theory can be applauded. But his main concepts are too vague, his arguments are often incomplete or incorrect, and his recommendations are either ill-chosen or ill-defended.

Ashcraft condemns this century's flight into philosophy by Anglo-American political theorists. It began as a flight from ideology, in an attempt to avoid the political imperative of choice between liberalism and Marxism. It ended in conceptual analysis so abstract as to be both historically stupid and politically sterile. Ashcraft decries pursuit of universal ideas and perennial problems. But even theorists of historical sensibility are said to fail to tie political theory to current tasks of action in politics. Such mistakes are attributed to theorists from Sabine to Strauss, Plamenatz to Hacker, and Catlin to Wolin. Against them, Ashcraft urges "the importance of ideology as a way of *doing* political theory" and "the importance of the political context to the interpretation of political theory."² Thus Ashcraft should put his case in terms of historical context—political, conceptual, and otherwise. To be sure, he gestures in this direction; but his concepts and arguments fall far short.

First take the key concept of ideology. According to Ashcraft,

¹ *The Journal of Politics*, (August, 1980), 687-689.

² *Ibid.*, 701 and 704.

those splitting political theory from ideology regard "ideology as an emotive, non-rational phenomenon" and the ideologist "as a committed partisan seeking to advance the interests of a particular party or class, or as a defender or critic of the existing distribution of social and political power in his or her society."³ Even by Ashcraft's own description, then, these very different views of ideology imply very different projects of political theory. By at least some of these conceptions, theorists noted by Ashcraft surely would consider themselves ideologists. To take but one big example, Sheldon Wolin's work has been self-consciously critical "of the existing distribution of social and political power in his . . . society."⁴

Moreover, some of Ashcraft's other targets offer detailed treatments of ideology which fall outside the senses sketched above. Some portray ideology as attempted social science.⁵ Others treat it as a genre of political thought and action.⁶ Even those who take it as sheer partisanship typically cite other features—such as holism, determinism, and programatic vision—to highlight the differences between ideology and political theory.⁷ Furthermore, recent theorists often emphasize differences between pure partisanship and critical partisanship. And dividing critical partisans into the cynical and the principled seems to be a crucial point for some.⁸

³ *Ibid.*, 692.

⁴ In this respect, Ashcraft's criticisms exploit his own ambiguity of "ideology" far more than any common mistake among his targets. Thus his interpretations of passages from various theorists often depart from what I would take to be the actual meanings in context. Cf. *ibid.*, 695, with what Wolin writes in *Politics and Vision* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960), 194.

⁵ Cf. Dante Germino, *Beyond Ideology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), a work repeatedly cited by Ashcraft. Also cf. Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics* (New York: Basic Books, 1962).

⁶ This could be argued to be the most frequent sense of "ideology" in such diverse theorists as Hannah Arendt, Hayden White, Clifford Geertz, Kenneth Burke, and Robert Putnam. Cf. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (4th ed.; New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973); White, *Metahistory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973); Geertz, "Ideology as a Cultural System," in *Ideology and Discontent*, ed. David Apter (New York: Free Press, 1964), 47-76; Burke, "Ideology and Myth," *Accent*, 7 (Summer 1947), 195-205; Putnam, *The Beliefs of Politicians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973).

⁷ Cf. Chaim I. Waxman, ed., *The End of Ideology Debate* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968); Richard H. Cox, ed., *Ideology, Politics, and Political Theory* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1969); John S. Nelson, "The Ideological Connection, Parts I and II," *Theory and Society*, 4 (Fall-Winter 1977), 421-448 and 573-590.

⁸ Like many recent Marxists, Ashcraft seems inclined to forget that criticism need not always be constructive or lead to a responsible position. Working within

Thus, while Ashcraft is right to underscore recent attempts to sever political theory from ideology, his account is misleadingly simple. Apart from failing his own standards of historiography, Ashcraft's argument about ideology misses a major aim uniting these various distinctions. All attempt a response to the challenge of objectivity and rigor posed by twentieth-century social sciences.⁹ Indeed, as Ashcraft knows, political theorists have turned to philosophy in part because of their need to reconsider the epistemologies informing projects in political theory and the social sciences.¹⁰ Against Ashcraft, it could be argued that recent concern for epistemology derives from efforts to avoid the philosophy/ideology/science splits common among theorists earlier in this century, as well as among behavioral scientists of later years. Otherwise, how are we to understand how students of politics can speak to larger concerns than those of the immediate moment? And if they cannot, then how can we have any confidence in what they say even about events at hand? From Ashcraft's claims about adequate historiography, it is clear that not even he would abandon all conceptions of objectivity and rigor. But how, then, are we to deal with specific assertions, which can be neither guaranteed absolutely nor separated utterly from the limitations of our particular situations?

Oddly, Ashcraft gives only the most glancing view—let alone defense—of his own stance on these issues. In his twenty-fifth footnote, he endorses "Marxism" on these matters, adding that "the best non-Marxist presentation of these issues is still Karl Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia*." Aside from missing that Mannheim saw himself as stating a "Marxist" view, Ashcraft can be faulted for failing to note the avalanche of criticism set loose by Mannheim's position. Without recognition and rebuttal of such criticism, Ashcraft's argument lacks a plausible foundation. Nor can a general mention

Marxism, this reminder *may* be unnecessary; but reaching beyond Marxism, it becomes crucial under current conditions.

⁹ Cf. John G. Gunnell, *Political Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Winthrop, 1979).

¹⁰ Cf. *ibid.*; Gunnell, *Philosophy, Science, and Political Inquiry* (Morristown, NJ: General Learning Press, 1975). For criticisms of this move as but another aspect of the flight into philosophy on the part of recent political theorists, see: Ashcraft, "On the Problem of Methodology and the Nature of Political Theory," *Political Theory*, 3 (February 1975), 5-25; Paul F. Kress, "Against Epistemology," *Journal of Politics*, 41 (May 1979), 526-542. For a response, see: John S. Nelson and Ira L. Strauber, "For Epistemology," unpublished paper.

of Marxism help much, given the great ambiguity of that category. Hence, precisely what is rejected when Ashcraft denounces the enterprise of "universal ideas" and "perennial problems" must remain unknown. As a result, how Ashcraft could avoid radical relativism can only be guessed, if that. An argument this incomplete cannot be convincing.

The condition of Ashcraft's argument about our choice between Marxism and liberalism is even worse. He contends without much support that this is the unavoidable choice of our times. He correctly discerns that few Anglo-American theorists choose Marxism, but that the rest are far from united in choosing liberalism. Asserting without defense that a political and economic critique of liberalism is mandatory, Ashcraft then condemns a wide variety of recent theorists for muffing this task or missing it altogether. Plainly, this argument is vulnerable in at least four respects.

First, why is liberalism assumed to be beyond salvage? Much political theory these days is easily read as reconstruction of liberalism. This can range from the polemics of neo-conservatism to the existentialist and religious sensibility of a thinker like Glenn Tinder.¹¹ Contrary to the implication of Ashcraft, much of the work is self-consciously ideological; and some of it even moves toward the sort of historical sensibility rightly recommended by Ashcraft. This includes theorists cited by Ashcraft himself—e.g., John Plamenatz. By failing to explain the irreparable defects of liberalism, let alone to argue his case, Ashcraft falters badly.

Second, why is Marxism assumed to be beyond rejection? While no one would accuse Ashcraft of putting Marxism beyond criticism, his arguments do imply it to be basically correct. So far as I can see, this remains an utterly unsupported assumption all the way through the Ashcraft article. As with Mannheim's sociology of knowledge, there is a huge set of arguments against every known version of Marxism. To say the least, this leaves the inevitability of a Marxist foundation for current political theory in doubt.

¹¹ Cf. Lewis A. Coser and Irving Howe, eds., *The New Conservatives* (New York: Quadrangle, 1974); Philip Abbott, "Understanding the 'New Conservatives'," *Polity*, 10 (Winter 1977), 261-273; Martin Mayer, "The Closet Conservatives," *American Scholar*, 46 (Spring 1977), 230-237; Amitai Etzioni, "The Neoconservatives," *Partisan Review*, 44 (#3 1977), 431-437; Wolin, "The New Conservatives," *New York Review of Books*, 23 (February 5, 1976), 6-11. Also cf. Tinder, "Is Liberalism Out of Date?" *Journal of Politics*, 23 (May 1962), 258-276; Tinder, *Tolerance* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1975.)

Third, why ignore current criticisms of liberalism? Ashcraft thinks that recent criticisms of liberalism have been superficial and ineffectual:

'Politics' is, on the level of practice, reduced to 'thinking' in the language of philosophy. In place of a political critique of liberalism which attacks its basic economic and political assumptions and institutions, contemporary political theorists have chosen to appeal to a 'philosophical' tradition which, by their own accounts, was destroyed or undermined by those presuppositions and practices. Operating within this enclosed circle, many Anglo-American political theorists have thus become more or less unwilling defenders of liberalism as a political ideology in its opposition to Marxism, while also criticizing liberalism as a philosophical framework or cultural tradition. . . .¹²

Surely many of the theorists named by Ashcraft have thought themselves to be attacking the "basic economic and political assumptions and institutions" of liberalism. If Ashcraft believes them mistaken, then he must at least explain how. Moreover, might they not respond that failing to couch such criticisms in broader philosophical and cultural terms is to accept the liberal (and Marxist) terms of discourse? Once that is done, giving good reasons to reject liberalism (or Marxism) becomes exceedingly difficult, if not impossible. In that light, returning to a previous tradition for categories and principles might make sense, depending upon the tradition.

At this point, Ashcraft appears to make the same mistake he discerns in Leo Strauss and others: forgetting that, for us, all traditions are retrospectively constructed.¹³ How to study history and how to fit that into current political theory remain unspecified by Ashcraft. After all, there are many different views here among recent Marxists. But only on an inflexible view of history and historiography would the attempt to recover aspects of what the modern age has left behind be an outright contradiction, per Ashcraft's formulation. Only on a strict developmental view would what was once undermined be thereby irrecoverable, in any and every respect.

For one who accuses others of avoiding the responsibility of *praxis*, Ashcraft is signally silent on the proper relationships between political theory and practice. Furthermore, his indictment of others in this respect is less than persuasive in some cases. Ashcraft

¹² Ashcraft, "Political Theory and the Problem of Ideology," 700.

¹³ Cf. Gunnell, *Political Theory*, 66-93; White, *Metahistory*, 1, 42.

claims that "since Wolin, Strauss, Sabine, and others provide no indication of how the interests, classes, parties and presuppositions which structure the modern decline of or departure from the tradition of political philosophy can be overthrown or displaced, it is not at all clear from their writings what political theory, as they view it, has to do with political action, or what type of action is to be undertaken and by whom."¹⁴ There is much truth in this, but then recent Marxists are notorious for failing this same test.¹⁵ In addition, Wolin's thesis about epic theory, Hannah Arendt's argument about the action of thought in troubled times, and others' related claims must be addressed. That Ashcraft ignores them points to another shortcoming.

Fourth, why ignore positions beyond liberalism and Marxism? Ashcraft is wrong to conceive our condition as an unavoidable choice between these two ideologies. At least some of the theorists he discusses, and others he does not, have tried to transcend these options.¹⁶ They argue against his master contrast and his dichotomy of choice. They emphasize the increasing obsolescence of these ideologies, when compared with the concrete events, institutions, and issues now extant. Bureaucracy, centralization, growth, energy, ecology, inflation, totalitarianism, terrorism, nationalism, arms races, religious revival, and the rest: many of the matters of import in our times simply escape the aid of either liberalism or Marxism. Indeed, most of them are inconceivable in strictly liberal or Marxist terms.¹⁷ When we can trace ties to those ideologies, they appear more as sources than as solutions to current troubles. This is why Wolin writes that "private ownership of the means of production and private property in general have ceased to be crucial political topics."¹⁸ Nowhere that I know does Ashcraft rebut this point. Instead, he *assumes* it shows the irrelevance of Wolin's writings. What it actually suggests, however, is the irrelevance of the ideological choice so central to Ashcraft's arguments.

¹⁴ Ashcraft, "Political Theory and the Problem of Ideology," 699-700.

¹⁵ Cf. Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973).

¹⁶ Cf. John S. Nelson, "Stands in Politics," unpublished paper.

¹⁷ Cf. Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," *Partisan Review*, 20 (July-August 1953), 377-392; Robert L. Heilbroner, *An Inquiry into the Human Prospect* (2d.; New York: Norton, 1975).

¹⁸ Quoted in footnote 43 of Ashcraft, "Political Theory and the Problem of Ideology."

While we must not abandon that debate, we must not be confined to its questions and answers.

From this standpoint, I would argue that the very form of ideology is increasingly irrelevant to our times. To be sure, this argument could get off the ground only by defining "ideology" more precisely than Ashcraft has done. Although I can neither propound nor defend such a definition here¹⁹, I can at least point out that there is much reason to take ideology to be a specifically modern form. To pour the views of the stoics or sophists, let alone of Plato or Aristotle, into the same mold as those of Locke or Marx is to distort more often than to clarify. Similarly, if I am right to say that political theorists should now reach out for new concepts to cope with the contours of postmodern times, then they will be wise to turn to forms other than ideology. New positions are needed; their new contents can and must call forth new forms of expression. Engaging present politics in the spirit urged by Ashcraft requires no less than this. Doing political theory now must often mean leaving behind liberalism, Marxism, and even ideology.

¹⁹ Cf. Nelson, "Stands in Politics"; Tinder, "Transcending Tragedy," *American Political Science Review*, 68 (June 1974), 547-560.