Eric Voegelin’s critique of ideology and the functions of ideology under modern democratic conditions

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"It was the splendid achievement of a brilliant analyst, and it was so good that it hardly could be improved upon."

This is Voegelin’s laudatory appraisal of Kelsen’s Pure Theory of Law. For all the differences between the two authors, there are many similarities as well. Both writers were very critical of ideology. The irony is, of course, that in Kelsen’s perspective Voegelin’s theory would be disqualified as "ideology". And, vice versa, in Voegelin’s perspective Kelsen’s positivism would be rejected as "ideology". Although for different reasons I am an admirer of the work of both Kelsen en Voegelin, I think their critique of ideology is outdated.

In this paper I want to emphasize two points. First: democracy under modern conditions is only possible as representative government (following Benjamin Constant). Second: to make representative government work, we need ideology as a common framework of ideals and goals for political action (my own development of Constant’s thesis). So we should not follow Voegelin in his violent rejection of the notion of ideology.

Voegelin’s criticism of ideology

Let us start with Voegelin’s devastating comment on ideology and ideologists. What are Voegelin’s complaints about ideologies and ideologists? He makes four claims.

There is, first, the question of - what he calls - "intellektuelle Rechtschaffenheit" (intellectual honesty). This ideal is part of Weber’s inheritance. One of the virtues Weber thought a scholar should have was "intellektuelle Rechtschaffenheit". However - and this is important - honesty is not easy, if not impossible, as an ideologist. "Ideologies, whether Positivist, or Marxist, or National Socialist, indulge in constructions that are intellectually not tenable", Voegelin states. That ideology is a phenomenon of intellectual dishonesty is "beyond doubt", he continues, "because the various ideologies after all have been submitted to criticism, and anybody who is willing to read the literature knows that they are not tenable, and why".

That reproach reminds us of the critique of ideology that was further developed by thinkers as Karl Popper: ideologies are impervious to criticism and critical assessment. This element is connected to the intellectual dishonesty, Voegelin contends, because if one adheres to ideas while they have been refuted, the prima facie assumption must be that the ideologist is intellectually dishonest. Needless to say, this criticism of ideologies appertains to all forms of ideologies. Voegelin is opposed to "any ideologies", whether they are Marxist, Fascist, National Socialist, or what have you. They are incompatible with what he calls "science in the rational sense of critical analysis". As has been said before, Voegelin pays tribute to Max Weber as the great thinker who drew that problem to our attention.
A second feature of ideologies has to do with their social consequences. Voegelin seems to think that ideologies lead to noxious social results. He bluntly states: "A further reason for my hatred of National Socialism and other ideologies (italics added; PC) is quite a primitive one. I have an aversion to killing people for the fun of it." So ideologies, in his view, not only National Socialist, but every ideologie, lead to the killing of people for the fun of it.

That raises the question why people who otherwise are not quite stupid indulge in intellectual dishonesty as soon as they touch science. According to Voegelin "the fun" consists of gaining a pseudo-identity through asserting one's power, optimally by killing somebody. A pseudo-identity serves as a substitute for the human self that has been lost. Voegelin developed this theme in his study Eclipse of Reality (1970) and refers to Albert Camus as a fellow thinker who explored the same problem. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's Humanisme et Terreur (1947) is mentioned as an exemplification of the lost self that becomes a pimp for this or that murderous totalitarian power.

As a third motif for his aversion of ideologies, Voegelin refers to a predilection "to keep his language clean". If anything is characteristic of ideologies and ideological thinkers, "it is the intellectual jargon of a high level of complication, sometimes on a vulgarian level". Marx is adduced as an example. According to Voegelin Marx was an "intellectual swindler for the purpose of maintaining an ideology that would permit him to support violent action against human beings with a show of moral indignation".

Fourth and finally, Voegelin mentions a "particular hatred of ideologists" because they vulgarize the intellectual debate and give to public discussion a distinctly ochlocratic coloring. Today this has reached the point of considering as fascist or authoritarian even a reference to the facts of political and intellectual history that must be known if one wants to discuss the problems that come up in political debate.

With this last notion of ideology, Voegelin seems to think about much more recent ideological aberrations, such as the student revolt in the Sixties and attitudes of students in general. In his autobiography he writes on American students. In the South the problem of "ideological corruption among young people was negligible". The students were open-minded and had little contact with ideological sectarian movements. Voegelin's experiences in the East were less favorable. The ideological corruption of the East Coast affected the student mind profoundly. "A great number of students simply will not tolerate information that is not in agreement with their ideological prejudices", Voegelin tells us.

This last type of ideological insanity also has to do with the democratization of the universities.

When I say that prospects are dubious, I mean that in fact the active operation of the universities, especially in the fields of the social sciences and the humanities, has been widely destroyed through the famous democratization, especially through the participatory democracy, which means in fact that nobody is permitted to do his work in peace.
In a case like Berlin, leftist students simply do not permit anybody who was not a Marxist to open his mouth. Munich was fortunately preserved from the worst effects, partly because his institute there was a stronghold of nonideological science, Voegelin writes.

Is Voegelin's conception of ideology too broad?

After this *tour d'horizon* of Voegelin's critical remarks on ideology a question forces itself upon us: is his conception of ideology not much too broad to be fruitful? His notion of ideology covers an overwhelming range of convictions that are - at first sight at least - essentially different.

A stubborn preoccupation with prejudices - the first notion of ideology - seems to be different from ideology in the second sense: a pretext to kill people for the fun of it. The habit to use incomprehensible language (third notion of ideology) is despicable, to be sure. But it is something different from intolerant enthusiasm that was characteristic of the student revolt in the Sixties.

There may be some broader framework that legitimizes to bring those notions under a new structure, but that would require further analysis and argumentation than Voegelin presents.

To understand his reasons for this wide conception of ideology we have to deal with Voegelin's philosophy of history.

The origins of Voegelian philosophy of history

In his *Autobiography* Voegelin gives us some information about his intellectual development in the thirties. In the years 1933-36 he began to develop interests in neo-Thomism. He read the works of A.D. Sertillanges, Jacques Maritain, *Etienne* Gilson, and then got even more fascinated by the not so Thomistic but rather Augustinian Jesuits like Hans Urs von Balthasar and Henri de Lubac. "To this study, extending over many years, I owe my knowledge of medieval philosophy and its problems", Voegelin tells us.

This is a crucial passage. But, I believe, more for its omissions than for the explicit information it conveys. There is definitely much more to acquire than "knowledge of medieval philosophy and its problems" from Henri Lubac's vision of history and criticism of modernity. Voegelin seems to think that the Thomistic and Augustinian influences are more or less compatible. But there is one crucial difference. The Thomistic tradition is essentially *rationalistic*, whereas the Augustinian tradition is *voluntaristic*. Both influences had a decisive influence in Voegelin's work and an important question, so it seems, is whether they can be reconciled at all. The rationalistic influence manifests itself in Voegelin's adamant emphasis on rationality, criticism, openness towards refutation and so on. This reminds us of his positivist and Weberian bent, *pace*
the author's own interpretation of his intellectual development. But on the other hand, there is the Augustinian speculation on world history as the unfolding of the grand strife between the city of God and the earthly city. There we also gauge Henri Lubac's *Drame de l'humanisme athée*. Voegelin's synthesis of these intellectual influences seems to be that Christianity is presented as the more or less "rational" religion that had to compete with the "irrational" cults of late-Antiquity that it finally managed to supersede. Prominent among those cults of late-Antiquity was gnosticism. "Gnosis", according to Voegelin in *The New Science of Politics*, "was an accompaniment of Christianity from its very beginnings; its traces are to be found in St. Paul and St. John. Gnostic heresy was the great opponent of Christianity in the early centuries."

So far, so good. But acknowledging the importance of gnosticism as a historical competitor to Christianity is one thing, lumping *all other* non-Christian or anti-Christian philosophies, ideologies, systems of ideas and religious currents as essentially "gnostic" or crypto-gnostic is quite another. And that is exactly what Voegelin, more or less following Augustine and the Augustinian philosophers as Henri de Lubac, does. Trying to understand the whole of Modernity as essentially "gnostic" seems to me an enormous *tour de force*.

Let us try to look more closely at the different steps in Voegelin's analysis of modernity as essentially gnostic.

As has been said before, according to Voegelin we have "to recognize the essence of modernity as the growth of gnosticism." The term gnosticism as used by Voegelin, however, is much broader than the attitude or current described by the gnosticism-scholars such as Berkhof and others. Voegelin is a Feuerbach in reverse. In his christo-centric view of reality and history he thinks he can show an "inner logic" of Western political development "from medieval immanentism through humanism, enlightenment, progressivism, liberalism, positivism, into Marxism". Voegelin then anticipates on the unwillingness he presupposes among his readers. "One can easily imagine how indignant a humanistic liberal will be when he is told that his particular type of immanentism is one step on the road to Marxism". However, the present author is not so much indignant as curious what arguments could be advanced for maintaining such a bold hypothesis. Voegelin presents scanty proof for his sweeping statements. On the contrary, his generalizations grow wider and wider:

Secularism could be defined as a radicalization of the earlier forms of paracletic immanentism, because the experiential divination of man is more radical in the secularist case.

This is philosophy in the grand manner indeed. Sometimes Voegelin seems to be aware of the lifting of eyebrows he supposes from his reading public. In his *Autobiography* he writes "( ) in *Die politische Religionen* I still pooled together such phenomena as the spiritual movement of Ikhnaton, the medieval theories of spiritual and temporal power, apocalypses, the *Leviathan* of Hobbes, and certain National Socialist symbolism. A more adequate treatment would have required far-reaching differentiations between these various phenomena." But "far-reaching differentiations" do not seem to be Voegelin's strength.
Representation according to Voegelin

A second element of Voegelin's work we have to discuss are his remarks on representation. The central claim I hope to substantiate is that Voegelin is blind to the positive functions of ideologies have in systems of representative government. To substantiate this thesis we have to enter into a brief analysis of Voegelin's concept of representation, another key-concept of his thinking.

In his autobiography Voegelin writes that on occasion of the Walgreen Lectures in Chicago in 1951 a breakthrough occurred in his intellectual development. He felt obliged formulate some of the ideas that began to crystallize on the problem of representation and the relationship between representation and social and personal existence in truth. In what sense could the Soviet government, for instance, be considered to be representative of the Russian people? The Soviet government was not in power by virtue of representative elections in the Western sense. Voegelin called this "the problem of existential representation". Existential representation is always the core of effective government, independent of the formal procedures by which the existentially representative government achieved its position. In a primitive society where the mass of people is incapable of rational debate and of forming political parties who select issues, a government will rest on traditional or revolutionary forces without the benefit of elections. Why is the government tolerated under these circumstances? Because it is the result of "fulfilling more or less adequately the fundamental purposes for which any government is established - the securing of domestic peace, the defense of the realm, the administration of justice, and taking care of the welfare of the people".

This existential representation is empirically supplemented - at least in some historically existing societies - by a claim to what Voegelin dubs as "transcendental representation". That is: the symbolization of the governmental function as representative of divine order in the cosmos. In all the Near Eastern empires the king was considered to be the representative of the people before the god and of the god before the people.

Voegelin's terminology of existential and transcendental representation is not very enlightening

What is Voegelin's concept of "existential representation"? It seems to me a common truth about the legitimacy of states and governments. Every legitimate state first has to exist before we can ask whether it accomplishes his other functions: "order is heaven's first law" (Pope). A state that cannot successfully maintain its existence may be a constitutional state, a democratic state or whatever other beneficial qualification we might give it, since it cannot exist, it is useless.

Especially authors who have experienced the collapse of liberal democracies between the two worldwars are sensible to this "order-precedes-justice-argument". Voegelin sides with Robert H. Jackson that democracy is not a suicide pact (in the Terminiello-case of 1949).
We do not need to be Nazi-victims to understand this. In the German theory of the State (for instance in Weber’s famous definition of the state) the Zwangsmonopol was always proclaimed as an essential element.

So the question is not whether order and authority is important. The question is what will be gained by bringing this all too common observation under the notion of "representation".

What is representation?

Representation has been defined as "the making present again, in some non-literal sense, of some entity, whether personal or abstract". But that immediately confronts us with the question: in what sense, and under what circumstances, does one entity "stand for" another, and on what grounds can one say that representation is or is not taking place?

Edmund Burke made a celebrated distinction between representation and delegation. "A delegate merely mirrors and record the views of his constituents, whereas a representative is elected to judge according to his own conscience".

The philosopher Roger Scruton, more or less following Burke, makes a distinction between mandation, delegation and representation.

*Mandation* is the relation between an office-holder and an electorate, by virtue of the promises of the former to the latter, under which he is obliged to fulfil those promises.

*Delegation* is the relation between an officer and an electorate, when the electorate has instructed him to convey certain requests and commands to another body.

*Representation* is the relation between an officer and an electorate which has no power over the officer other than that provided by an election, and in which the officier is bound (a) to obey the principles and constitution of the assembly in which he sits, and (b) within that framework, to urge consideration of the interests of those who elected him.

But Burke was writing before the development of political parties and it may be contended that his conception of representation is too loose: it leaves too much discretion to the representatives. There must be some spiritual bond between representatives and those that are represented to make representative government work. This bond, so it seems, is "ideology". Anarchism, communism, socialism, liberalism - those more or less coherent sets of ideas intermediate between voters and representatives.

In this context I use the word "ideology" not in any derogatory meaning, but as a more neutral term. An ideology is a more or less coherent set of ideas that provide the basis for some kind of organised political action. Ideologies offer an account or critique of the existing order. They provide a "world view". They give us a model for a desired future and a vision of the good society. They also outline how political change should be brought about.
I do not think that with this approach to ideology, I succumb to the gnostic temptation or any other illicit attempt to realize the kingdom of heaven on earth. Ideology is simply a device to mediate between the concrete and the ideal. In On Liberty John Stuart Mill gave us the outlines of a liberal ideology. In God and State Bakunin presented the ideology of anarchism. Marx presented communist ideology in The Communist Manifesto. In Reflections on the Revolution in France conservative ideology was expounded by Edmund Burke. There is no need to think that those ideologies or ideologists are "intellectually dishonest" or lead to the killing of people for the fun of it. Nor can we say that those thinkers did not "keep their language clean" or "will not tolerate information that is not in agreement with their ideological prejudices." But the most important thing is: we need ideology in representative government under modern conditions.

This last claim I hope to make clear in what follows.

Benjamin Constant on democracy under modern conditions

With the words "representative government under modern conditions" I refer, of course, to Benjamin Constant's distinction between two kinds of liberty, as developed in his famous lecture The Liberty of the Ancients compared with that of the Moderns (1819).

The first is the liberty the exercise of which was so dear to the ancient peoples. It consisted in exercising collectively, but directly, several parts of the complete sovereignty; in deliberating, in the public square, over war and peace. The aim of the ancients was the sharing of social power among the citizens of the same fatherland.

The second is the liberty the enjoyment of which is especially precious to the modern nations. What would an Englishmen, a Frenchman, and a citizen of the United States of America understand today by the word "liberty"?, Constant asked. And his answer is: "For each of them it is the right to be subjected only to the laws, and to be neither arrested, detained, put to death or maltreated in any way by the arbitrary will of one or more individuals." This we might call the principle of legality. It formulates - in terms familiar to a contemporary reader - the rule of law, in contrast to the rule of men. But this is not all. Constant goes further with enumerating the specific political rights that demarcate an individual sphere of the citizen exempt from state power: the right to express their opinion, choose a profession and practice it, to dispose of property, and even to abuse it; to come and go without permission, and without having to account for their motives or undertakings. The modern concept of liberty is also the right to exercise some influence on the administration of the government, either by electing all or particular officials, or through representations, petitions, demands to which the authorities are more or less compelled to pay heed. So the next element of modern liberty is political rights. In contemporary terminology: constitutionalism as a further development of the principle of legality.

Constant's reference to representation is crucial. It makes clear that the modern concept of liberty matches with representative government and not with direct democracy as was common in the ancient city states of Greece.
Ancient liberty is no longer possible in a democracy under modern conditions. For three reasons.

First, ancient republics were restricted to a small territory. The most populous, the most powerful, the most substantial among them, was not equal in extension to the smallest of modern states.

Second, the ancient states had slaves. So the mechanical professions were committed to people in chains.

Third, commerce does not, like war, leave men’s lives intervals of inactivity.

The ancients and the moderns: radical differences

The modern world offers us a completely opposing view. Thanks to commerce, to religion, to the moral and intellectual progress of the human race, there are no longer slaves among the European nations. Free men must exercise all professions, provide for all the needs of society. That leaves us, moderns, much less time for politics. We cannot spent every day at the public square in discussions. We can no longer enjoy the liberty of the ancients, which consisted in an active and constant participation in collective power. Our freedom must consist of peaceful enjoyment and private independence.

Constant warns us against all unrealistic nostalgia for the concept of liberty and democracy that cannot be applicable to our modern condition. We are no Persians subject to a despot, nor Egyptians subjugated by priests, nor Gauls who can be sacrificed by their druids, nor, finally, Greeks or Romans, whose share in social authority consoled them for their private enslavement.

We are modern men, who wish each to enjoy our own rights, each to develop our own faculties as we like best, without harming anyone; to watch over the development of these faculties in the children whom nature entrusts to our affection, the more enlightened as it is more vivid; and needing the authorities only to give us the general means of instruction which they can supply, as travellers accept from them the main roads without being told by them which route to take.

Constant presents his own critique of the totalitarian leanings in the ideology of the French Revolution. He points out the dangerous implications of the political philosophy of Rousseau and Abbé de Mably. Terror and totalitarian catastrophe result from the wish to realize ancient liberty under modern conditions.

But it is not my ambition to present Constant’s approach to ideological aberrations in contrast with the one developed by Voegelin. What interests me in this context is the unavoidability of representative government as the sole model of democracy that can exist under modern conditions, that is: without slavery. We are in "need for the representative system", Constant writes. "The representative system is nothing but an organization by means of which a nation charges a few individuals to do what it cannot or does not wish to do herself." Constant is completely free from any sentimental nostalgia for the past: "Poor men look after their own
business; rich men hire stewards." But rich men who employ stewards keep a close watch on whether these stewards are doing their duty. Constant writes. My point is: this is only possible when the representatives feel themselves obliged to a grander political set of ideas they have in common with the people who voted for them. If we have no such framework at our disposal, we are obliged to involve ourselves much more in politics than is possible under modern conditions. In other words, ideology is indispensible in representative government in order to avoid a return to the ancient condition of direct involvement of the citizen in the affairs of the state.