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THE FUTURE OF IDEOLOGY IN AN INTERDEPENDENT WORLD

by Charles C. West

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"As ideology recedes," reads the newspaper headline, "the world is returning to territorial and economic disputes." One reads the message everywhere in the Western press. Ideology--by which is meant Marxism-Leninism, with its science of social conflict, its totally planned economy, and its vision of a classless society--has lost its power to deceive. The peoples of Eastern Europe have awakened from an irrational inhuman nightmare to face the actual problems of a competitive market economy in which the values and goals of society are set by the powers of production, consumption and finance. We are now back to the real world, we are told, of national and group interests, of capital formation and techno-industrial developments, of competition for raw materials, and of survival by success in business and trade.

There is a basic problem with this picture: it is itself ideological. Because it is not so recognized, because it is presented to us as the simple reality of social dynamics in the modern world, we are deprived of the ground on which to stand as we work out our interdependent future. Or, to change the metaphor, artificial lights shut out stars which might otherwise provide our orientation. My theses in this essay are three.

First, ideology as a quality of human thought has always been with us and always will be. As long as human beings are both sinful and finite, the structures of truth they create will be both limited and biased by social experience and interest, and will claim to be more universal than they are. And positively, as long as human beings are called to act responsibly to realize justice amid the powers of nature and human society, they will have to believe more deeply in the rightness of their analyses and actions than may be justified.

Second, although great philosophies of the past have often made ultimate claims for their ethnocentric cultures and politics, the two great universal ideologies of modern times,
liberalism and revolutionary Marxism, are both in crisis today, but they will not disappear because each represents an ecumenical experience and expresses certain ecumenical values that, once discovered, will not go away.

Third, the way forward in the search for peace, justice and responsibility toward the earth lies neither with the projection of a new moral rationality which will claim to be universal but will in fact be ideological again, nor in the victory of all the oppressed over their oppressors, which will claim to be liberation but will in fact create new patterns of domination. Rather it lies in the interaction of universal claims to truth, justice and liberation with the real experience of human communities—their loves, their values, their conflicts and their constitutions. In this process the Christian church has a contribution to make because it has lived in this tension since its birth.

These theses will be presented in turn.

1. What is ideology? All definitions involve a history. For the inventor of the term, the French philosopher of Napoleon’s time Destutt de Tracy, it was the "science of ideas." Like his predecessors Condillac and Helvetius, and their predecessor John Locke, he understood all ideas as derived from sensations, as expressions of human social biology. But the reductionism was only apparent. The real object of all these Enlightenment humanists was the education of the human race, the liberation of human reason to fulfill its destiny in harmony with all of nature.

It was Karl Marx, however, who gave the concept its current meaning, not so much in his use of the word as in the role he assigned to human thought. His formulation is classic:

> In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life processes in general. It is not the consciousness of man that determines their being, but on the contrary their social being that determines their consciousness.

From this premise Marx's successors drew the conclusion that all thought is ideological. It is a form of human activity in the struggle of species-humanity to realize itself through labor. Where the solidarity of the human species is broken by the division of labor, the world of ideas reflects this division and the conflicts that grow out of it. Marx's own work deals primarily with the consciousness of alienated humanity: religion, that protests yet sanctifies and offers escape from the oppressions of this world by referring us to another,

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1Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy.
purer one; philosophy, that revolutionizes the world in the realm of ideas without ever changing material conditions ("The German Ideology"); political morality, that turns class-dominated nation, state, and law into ultimate principles of order, and above all economic theory, that turns exploitation into a law of nature (the fetishism of property, money and capital). But Marx's successors were quick to see that his own historical materialism was, in a positive sense, an ideology, that of the masses of poor exploited workers seeking liberation from the inhuman conditions of their lives. It both guided and reflected their struggle. It analyzed the powers of this world as part of the strategy and tactic of their overthrow and the promise of a new undivided classless humanity to come. In the light of this mass foundation, this praxis, and this universal hope, these followers of Marx could say with Lenin that, as an ideology, "Marxism is omnipotent because it is true."

An ideology, then, has five characteristics according to this model. First, it is the reflection of the life and struggle of a particular group in society. Second, it is an analysis of both the history and the structure of reality from the perspective of that group. Third, it is a guide to the group in bending the powers of the world to its social purposes in the search for peace, prosperity and justice. Fourth, it claims to be true not only for the group but for all people. It claims to be a universal expression of reality and justice. Finally, it offers hope to all of society at the end of the process and the struggle.

So defined, it is clear that ideological elements have been present in major structures of religious and philosophical thought from the beginning of recorded history. Confucianism in ancient China reflected the struggles of a scholarly officialdom against the more aggressive military philosophies of its time. Plato's Republic was in one dimension an aristocratic protest against democracy gone wild. Aristotle's Politics enshrined in the structure of being itself the social order of a city-state that was disappearing even as he wrote. The test of false prophecy in the Old Testament was the degree to which it claimed divine covenantal blessing for the ruling powers at the cost of justice, mercy, and obedience to the Lord. "From the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain and from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely. They have healed the wound of my people lightly saying peace, peace, when there is no peace." (Jeremiah 6:13-14) Nor are the greatest of Christian theologians free of it: Ambrose wielding the power of the church in the court of the emperor, Thomas Aquinas qualifying feudalism with the values of the growing culture in the towns, Martin Luther expressing German independence of a far-off papacy, or John Calvin, to quote R.H. Tawney, approaching the New World of business and finance "in the spirit of a conqueror organizing a new province, not of a suppliant arranging a compromise with a still powerful foe." ² All of these were, of course, much more than ideologies. They

contained within themselves a transcendent reference, an openness to truth breaking into the social context from beyond or, in the Hebrew-Christian tradition a response to revelation, which make them lasting resources for people in societies other than their own. Nevertheless we cannot appropriate them or their successors without careful critical attention to their ideological dimension. Human rationality, contrary to Thomas Aquinas, has not merely been weakened or dimmed by human sin. It has been corrupted. It is a divine gift for discerning truth which human beings have turned into an instrument for subjecting truth to their own powers, goals and interests. No structure of human thought is free, either of this distortion or of trying to conceal the agent's will to power and domination by claiming greater objectivity and universality than is warranted. Ideas are instruments for probing reality. They are also weapons of the interest or power group that holds them. Our thought is caught in this ideological ambiguity. This is what we have learned afresh, though it always has been a biblical insight, from the modern post-Marxist definition of ideology.

Ideology in the 19th and 20th centuries, however, has taken on a more positive, a more systematic form, in Western civilization first, but now throughout the world. It is an effort to make sense of the powers which the scientific, technological, industrial revolution have released among us and to control them for human purposes.

There is no ultimate rational structure in this surge of events which can correct and direct us all. The French mathematician Laplace hypothesized a determined universe such that a superhuman intelligence knowing the position of every particle at a given time and the forces at work upon it, would be able to calculate accurately all events of the past and the future. The social and moral universe, however, is no such determined system, and human behavior in it has no such omniscient capacities. Responsible moral action will be based on as objective an analysis as possible of the loyalties and values shared by the community of which the agent is a part, and an awareness of the challenges and the questions which come from outsiders and from God. But action cannot wait for perfect moral certainty. A sense of its duty and rightness will always proceed from limited experience, subjective sensitivities and analysis driven by prior choices of perspective and emphasis. Understanding which leads to commitment and action will always have an ideological slant.

This leaves us with the ongoing question: How is ideology discerned as such? How are the ideological elements in all our analyses--scientific, social, philosophical and even theological--to be discovered and transcended? With reference to what more ultimate reality and by what basic covenant can we live together in peace and in some degree of justice?

2. The second point is that since ideology has become an intellectual tool for finding meaning in the forces and social changes of the scientific, industrial and technological revolutions of our age, its reference has been not to traditions and cultures but to the universal laws which govern social change everywhere so that human beings can control it
to expand their freedom and their power. Two such ideologies have been the major competitors: liberalism and revolutionary Marxism. Their claims to ecumenical validity have indeed been challenged. Recent history has been full of revolts against them by indigenous cultures and religions most recently in the Islamic world. But these revolts have a curious ambiguity about them. As India and China have differently demonstrated, they tend to call upon the same human rights, the same political ideas and the same confidence in science, technology and industry as the powers against which they rebel and the ideological structure of their revolt is likely to be permeated by the analysis and the hopes to which Karl Marx first gave expression.

That Marxism is an ideology of universal humanity no one these days disputes. Liberalism, however, requires clarification. It describes an ethos so pervasive that many who reject the word live by its assumptions. In the United States today it is taken to mean strong government action on behalf of human rights and welfare, and thus, by implication, bureaucratic interference in the private lives of citizens. In 19th century England it meant free speech, free trade and minimal government. In Europe it has stood for a secular humanist perspective. In Britain and America it has often described the social ethic of the established churches. I mean by it here roughly what Alasdair MacIntyre calls the "Enlightenment project," the structure of individualist humanism that underlies the science, the technology, the industry, the education and the politics of much of the Western world.

The basic methodological premise of this ideology is confidence in the ability of human reason operating by empirical analysis (the scientific method) to discover ever-increasing horizons of relevant truth. This is a critical not a naive rationalism. Hume and Kant very early exploded the illusion that the human mind could discover the structure of things in themselves. But it is a critical confidence in the unlimited ability of the human mind to solve problems, to discover and make use of the laws of nature to expand the possibilities of human life. In Kant's words, "sapere audel dare to know! 'Have the courage to use your own understanding,' is the slogan of the Enlightenment."5

3There have been several attempts to project a conservative ideology in the sense defined above. None of them, however, has been very influential. Conservatism is more an orientation of mind and spirit which emphasizes tradition and continuity in all change. There are conservative liberals and even conservative Marxists as well as conservatives who work out of the experience of a particular culture and its values. Conservatism may be a quality of ideological thought, but until better instructed I find it hard to define as an ideology in itself.

4After Virtue.

This is an ideological confidence as surely as is Marx's doctrine of the social
determination of the consciousness. It is a functional way of thinking, whose object is
control over reality and the enhancement of human power in the service of human needs or
desires, not, as early modern scientists often believed, the contemplation of divine reality in
the laws of nature. As ideology it contains within itself a curious contradiction, in the
Hegelian and Marxist sense of the word. The enhancement of human scientific knowledge
and control produces power from the atom or out of the environment that can lead to human
self-destruction.

Spiritually this ideology is rooted in the primacy of the autonomous free human
individual. This, too, is sometimes paradoxical because it can be based on an epistemology
of sensations (John Locke) or on a mechanical calculation of pleasures and pains (Jeremy
Bentham). It is not inconsistent with determinism in psychology, sociology or economics.
Nevertheless the assumption is that individuals are primary autonomous realities whose
choices and actions mold history. From this two consequences follow:

First, that controls of individual behavior should be minimal and should be aimed not at
realizing some common good or desirable community but at maximizing the opportunities for
individual self-determination and choice. Education should provide the tools to do this.
Democratic politics should regulate the process and prevent violations. Culture should be
tolerant and pluralistic without limit. The goals of life should be set by individuals and
private groups.

Second, the behavior of individuals in the process of pursuing their own ends, is subject
to scientific study which should be the basis of public policy. The primary example of this
is the science of economics. It is pointless to intervene in the process to achieve socially
defined goals because this is only self-defeating. The market must decide what goods and
services are produced and consumed by whom, and when and where.

The faith of liberal ideology is a curious one, that in the process of pursuing private
interests, myriad individuals will produce a harmonious and creative society which will
continually enlarge the welfare and creative possibilities for all. The only public common
good worth having is the result of the interaction of private interests, desires and goals.
Human beings can be trusted when trained in the scientific method to understand the
necessary harmony between the individual and the general interest.

Marxist ideology was, of course, a fundamental expose of the social illusions of this
liberalism. Marx's fundamental contribution to social and to Christian thought was
systematically to analyze the effects of human sinful self-centeredness on the operations of
economic power. Using its own method he turned the science of economics from an
angelology into a demonology, a science of alienated conflict-driven humanity. He exposed
individualism as self-centered privatization and held up the vision of species humanity where the self is merged into the welfare of the whole.

Marxism was, of course, also paradoxical in its view of human knowledge and human nature. It trusted that the materially determined laws of history would by themselves lead through revolution, to the total emancipation of humankind. It also measured truth by the power of results. Its version of critical self-confidence was the strategy and tactic of revolution, and the building of socialist society toward communism. It too believed, more naively than the liberals, that in human nature once freed from private property, there would be no distinction between universal collective humanity and the desires of each human being. The result as we know has been new forms of tyranny and exploitation.

Nevertheless these two ideologies will continue to compete in one form or another, to organize the interdependent world of the future. As long as peoples are victimized by the way in which structures of corporate power -- scientific, technological, industrial and financial -- organize the world in service of their own interests, something like Marxist analysis of that power, and a Marxist strategy for resisting it, will be needed. As long as the market system works to break up cultures, neighborhoods and families, to merge them into a mass society where only the individual counts, some new vision of human community like the Marxist one will be called for. Yet liberalism comes back with the constant reminder that the human economy will not work unless driven by millions of personally interested participants, that no community can be human that is not formed by the tensions, struggles and loyalties of its members, and that no social order is stable that is not open to the challenge of its dissenters.

These truths each ideology has to uphold, not only against the other, but against the growing wave of national, cultural and religious forces which make their own claims to organize humanity in imperial domination of other humans.

3. All of this provides a new opportunity, and a warning, to the ecumenical mission of the Christian church. In a sense both liberalism and Marxism are secularized versions of the Christian mission. The transcendent humanism that each in its way expresses, reflects the promise and reality of new humanity in Jesus Christ which the church has always proclaimed. The Marxist insight into the social determination of human consciousness, and the liberal critical confidence in a scientific method aimed at producing effective results, reflect biblical insights into the self-centered distortion of the sinful human mind, and the proper orientation of thought toward the service of God and the neighbor rather than toward the transcendent knowledge of good and evil. The active historical hope that both display reflects the Jewish and Christian faith in a God who works in human history and will bring His kingdom. But the church has a critical contribution to make at all three of these points. First, both of these ideologies, in their struggle to define humanity, have forgotten the reality
which the church has so imperfectly and sinfully embodied through the centuries: that humanity is defined not by its individual or collective autonomy but by the relations into which human beings are called and by which they are both affirmed and limited. The image of God, said Dietrich Bonhoeffer, drawing inspiration from Genesis and from the great Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, is in the relationship of I and Thou. The other person, whether divine or human, is both the limit at the center of my existence and the creative possibility by which I live. People do not become human by mastering their environment and extending their power but by relating to one another in love. This relationship is endlessly creative and endlessly liberating. The human community that reflects it lives by mutual responsible service which frees its members for their own creative contribution. Justice is the expression of this mutual responsibility. This means that the Christian understanding of human nature and community comes very close to the traditional ethnocentric cultures which are being broken down today by the dynamics of the world economy. But in a paradox which goes back to the apostle Paul, the interpersonal community is also ecumenical in its very essence. The covenant of God is not for one nation but for all peoples. In traditional terms the church is both catholic and apostolic at the same time. Its universality is an expression of its interpersonal community.

How is this possible politically and economically today? The church is not setting as good an example as it should even while in the world through informal networks and through growing structures of relations both economic and political, fragile signs of progress are appearing. It is an art which both church and world have to learn together.

Second, the church has always known, although it has sometimes pridefully denied, that truth is the expression of a relationship not mastery of the object known, or contemplation of an impersonal structure. All knowledge is therefore a call to responsibility to faithful action with relation to that which is known. In theological terms doctrine is in order to worship. It is not a truth possessed by the knower but a witness in human understanding to divine revelation. The danger of ideology is always present in this way of knowing. What saves us from it is the reality of the other whose revelation to us we do not control and who changes us in the revealing. This insight is also present in some liberal and in recent Marxist thought. It grows upon us as we face the prospect of changing our human goals and lifestyles in order to live in harmony with our natural environment. It may be that we will learn about it also from closer encounter with each other's cultures across the world. In any case our critical task together in the coming years is to learn how the effectiveness of knowledge in increasing our power over nature and other persons can be re-directed, not with reference to some abstract structure of universal law, but by allowing the object of our knowledge to reveal it, him- or herself to us in ever deeper ways.
Third, hope is, in Christian understanding, eschatological. This means that it is never the result of human planning and action but is always present in human events. We live, we plan, we act in hope. This hope is a quality we bring to our analysis of politics, economics, and the rest of society, not something we derive from analyses begun on some other premise. The kingdom of God is present. It is also coming at the end of the age. Our hopes should be concrete, for more just and productive economic order, for the development of structures of peace and mutual interdependence, for a social philosophy that will unite us all. Such hopes can be ideological if we pin the meaning of life on their fulfillment. What saves us from this is awareness that God's promises to us transcend and correct all of our own plans and projections and will continue to do so even while those promises are fulfilled in our lives, until the end of time. We need to learn together the art of provisional hope in politics, in economics and in society.