The change in Western political life reflects the fact that the fundamental political problems of the industrial revolution have been solved: the workers have achieved industrial and political citizenship; the conservatives have accepted the welfare state; and the democratic left has recognized that an increase in overall state power carries with it more dangers to freedom than solutions to social problems.

(Seymour Martin Lipset, 50)

Even a brief survey of the constant stream of publications on the topic of ideology since Karl Mannheim’s 1929 Ideologie und Utopie reveals that ideology theory has been one of most long-standing and most widely attractive intellectual pursuits in the twentieth century to the present day. Typically, the persistent popularity of “ideology” has been attributed to the concept’s inherent ambiguity and plasticity. More than one commentator has remarked that it may well be the most vexing and hotly contested idea in the human sciences (Teun van Dijk, Ideology: A Multidisciplinary Approach, 1998). It is therefore not surprising that Transaction Publisher should reissue a 1975 edited volume on the subject of the so-called “end of ideology debate,” a controversy that made big waves in the 1960’s and has since become an integral point of reference both in the social sciences and in the humanities. Because of the unabated interest in the question of ideology and its many lives, Mostafa Rejai’s collection of original contributions to the school of thought that predicted ideology’s impending death remains a valuable resource for teachers and students alike.
Originally published in 1975, *Ideology: Cultural and Comparative Status* offers the contemporary reader a preliminary overview of the discourse that ensued after the publication of Daniel Bell’s 1960 now seminal work *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties*. Mostafa Rejai is Distinguished Professor Emeritus of political science at Miami University, Ohio and has written extensively on the concept of leadership. In an attempt to introduce his audience to the discussion about the thesis of the “decline of ideology,” Rejai brings together in this volume 13 papers originally published between 1960 and 1970. The tripartite division is meant to take us from the basic theoretical premises to the empirical evidence and finally to the critical assessment of both. While it is evident that the book is intended as a general introduction to be used in sociology or political science classes, it is equally clear that the editor himself is not a neutral commentator. Rejai’s opening essay and his “introductory notes,” which preface each of the three sections of the book, are written from the perspective of a supporter of the Bell/Lipset hypothesis (fellow political sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset as the other key architect). This reading is encouraged further by the fact that the critical objections included in the text are directly attacked and rejected by the editor himself; for example, in Part III, ostensibly devoted to the “Critique,” one finds an essay by Rejai, W.L. Mason, and D. C. Beller that seeks to invalidate the “Dissenting View” of Joseph La Palombara.

Students of ideology theory will find this book useful primarily from a historical standpoint. If the articles are not meant to be representative of the debate as a whole, they do give the reader a good sense of the way in which it emerged and unfolded specifically in the social sciences. The purpose of this collection is to acquaint us with the political and intellectual context, the basic philosophical precepts, and the methodological discussions that developed out of the American post-war academic optimism about the de facto triumph of Western liberal democracy. This hope, it has turned out, was at best a premature projection and at worst merely another ideological maneuver. Raymond Aron, who predicted as early as 1955
the “Fin de l’âge idologique” (in T. W. Adorno and W. Dirks, eds., *Sociologica*, 1955), prefigured the “decline of ideology” thesis in his argument that the liberal welfare state of the industrialized countries was in the process of assuming global dominance as the most successful social order and in its course bring about the gradual fading of ideological struggles. The developing world, it was argued, required additional time but would ultimately catch up with modern civilization. The assumption was that advanced capitalist societies would inevitably raise people’s material conditions, which would, equally inevitably, lessen political differences and strife by making large-scale fundamental criticism obsolete. Today, more than half a century later, the bankruptcy of the majority of Western states in the middle of the deepest economic crisis since 1929 cannot but strike one as rather hasty or even naïve.

There are in the main two kinds of criticism that have since been raised against the end of ideology thesis. One of these is the perspective prevalent in cultural theory and is exemplified perhaps by Slavoj Žižek, who routinely maintains that the very essence of ideology is the assumption of an outside of ideology. That is, the notion of a post-ideological time or place constitutes the ideological gesture *per se*. This argument, however, is usually employed in conjunction with a definition of ideology that is so expansive as to include all forms of symbolic mediation, which is notably not the concept used by the end-of-ideology theorists. Drawing on a more common notion of ideology, Bell and Lipset, along with their supporters, had in mind something fairly specific when they diagnosed the weakening of ideology: communism. In his 1966 essay, included in Rejai’s collection, Joseph La Palombara astutely remarks on this identification of ideology with Marxism (248). Further, Rejai, following Bell and Lipset would not accept Žižek’s charge on the basis of the fact that by “the end of ideology” they never meant the complete vanishing of resistance and dissent but rather only its “decline.” (This distinction has not, however, remained important in the contemporary discourse.)
The other criticism is the traditional Marxist position that the confidence in the historical victory of the existing social system is merely the ideal legitimation of the underlying capitalist mode of production and its central institution: bourgeois private property. Marx himself had defined ideology (in The German Ideology) as the philosophical denial of the role of class struggle in capitalism and therefore as the intellectual apologia of the status quo. According to this view, ideology is a necessary byproduct of capitalist society and finds its ultimate confirmation precisely in the prognosis advanced by the end-of-ideology theorists, namely that “class politics,” i.e. revolutionary practice, has withered away. It is expressly the denial of the continued reality of class that serves the interests of one particular class, namely that of the ruling class. The Marxist approach, therefore, presents a direct attack on the Bell/Lipset hypothesis, whose advocates claim that their sociology is independent of any particular political agenda. While avowing to subscribe to the basic premise that economic conditions shape ideal mediations, these end-of-ideology thinkers ultimately deny the continued determining role of capitalist relations in the formation of discursive practices, including their own theories no doubt because they do not acknowledge the fundamental basis of capitalism: the reality of class. Curiously, then, Bell and Lipset’s materialism turns out to be a rather unprincipled one. In this respect, more recent end-of-history philosophies, such as that of Francis Fukuyama (The End of History and the Last Man, 1992) are not very different.

Another critical angle that helps shed light on the work of the decline-of-ideology writers is one which explores the tensions internal to the conceptual apparatus developed by Bell and Lipset. Rejai summarizes this set of ideas in his introductory essay “Political Ideology: Theoretical and Comparative Perspectives.” (This essay was reprinted in the first part of Rejai’s 1991 book Political Ideologies: A Comparative Approach, second edition 1995.) Explaining, as has since become common-place, that “definitions of ideology are legion”(2), he explores the cognitive, affective, evaluative, programmatic, and social-base “dimension” of the concept in order to offer
what he maintains is a neutral approach but actually shares much with the negative or pejorative one. According to Rejai, ideology is that which is not logical, not true, not complex, not descriptive but prescriptive, not free from particular interests, non-intellectual: “By political ideology is understood an emotion-laden, myth-saturated, action-related system of beliefs and value, about man and society, legitimacy and authority, acquired as a matter of routine and habitual reinforcement. The myths and values of ideology are communicated through symbols in a simplified, economical, and efficient manner. Ideological beliefs are more or less coherent, more or less articulate, more or less open to new evidence and information. Ideologies have a high potential for mass mobilization, manipulation, and control; in that sense, they are mobilized belief systems” (10). Predictably, he views fascism and communism as closely related representatives of such “mobilized belief systems” and describes the supposed liberal middle ground as inherently less susceptible to, or even lacking, such “extremism.” With this framework, it is clear from the outset that the imagined hegemony of the non-ideological must entail the erosion of the ideological. One might therefore argue that there is a truism at the heart of the decline-of-ideology thesis.

More damagingly, today’s reader cannot fail to notice that the book’s heavy reliance on empirical validation undermines many of its own central claims. Many of the articles and the editor operate on the assumption that the thesis of the decline of ideology can be verified or disproved through empirical studies that can accurately measure the relative strength of ideological activity in different countries. Thus, Section II consists for the most part of statistical analyses that, while adding a series of qualifications, mostly provide support for the thesis of the waning of ideological conflict. Census data is marshaled, for example, to assess “degrees of consensus” (214) in a 1965 paper by Masaaki Takane, who equates the retreat of communism in Japan with a professionalization of academia. This tendency to conceive liberalism as non-political and realistic (as opposed to utopian) is, of course, not unique, and betrays the fact, expressed by Michael Novak in an 1968 essay (chapter 12), that “pragmatism,
too, has the characteristics and effects of an ideology” (302). The real limits of such a positivist trust in empirical evidence, however, become visible in historical retrospect. The Communist Party in Japan, for example, has witnessed a noticeable increase in popularity over the last few years, even since before the economic “downturn,” and there has been a renewed interest in Karl Marx’s writings. This, interestingly, is true of many the Western countries.

A. Hoogerwerf’s 1965 paper on the Netherlands in chapter 5 is not as exuberant as some of the other essays in Part II. Hoogerwerf compares the election programs of the major parties to show that between 1948 and 1963 the major parties have moved steadily closer to a general agreement over fundamental questions such as the responsibility of government towards the public welfare. At the same time, his research demonstrates that there are still considerable differences in the ways the electorate perceives key issues such as income distribution, and these differences manifest themselves in the election programs and stand in contrast to the politicians’ practical policy decisions. Hoogerwerf attributes this last finding to political alienation, which he in turn determines to be a product of a disjunction between the technocracy and the people. He sees this tension as a threat to democracy, but his confidence that resolution might be in sight is relatively muffled.

Chapter 4, on the other hand, explores what is explicitly described as an exception to the real trend of the decline of ideology. Erik Allardt’s paper on Finland (1964) corroborates Lipset’s ideas about a general decrease of class struggle but offers Finland and its persistently strong Communist party as a “deviant case.” The argument here is that the particular history of Finland and the specific role that the Communist party has traditionally played in the political landscape accounts for the fact that Leftist ideas continue to have a strong pull in Finland, while these Leftist ideas are also allegedly less radical than they once were. Allardt approaches the problem from two sides, claiming that communist ideology is both a mainstay in the country and an increasingly well-integrated political platform that has lost much of its former ideological force. This
allows him to maintain that Finland, after all, is not as exceptional as it may seem and actually conforms to the tendency of ideological decay, thus corroborating the Bell/Lipset thesis.

Of interest for the American readership is chapter 6, Robert E. Lane’s 1965 article on “The United States: Politics of Affluence.” This piece stands out mainly for its obvious misjudgments regarding the economic development under capitalism, in particular its reliance on the assumption that there is “no reason to anticipate a reversal of . . . [the continual economic growth]” (166). However, not only is the crisis of 1929 portrayed as the last serious economic crash, Lane also looks forward to an ever-increasing rapprochement between the citizens and the government as well as a lessening of religious and political differences. Indicators cited are an apparent rise in interpersonal trust and personal happiness as well as an increase in the individual’s sense of control, and the receding of all forms of dogmatism. On the basis of opinion polls and surveys, he makes his case while discarding any counter-evidence with almost amusing elusiveness and pathos: “The headlines will not show this consensus, nor will the demonstrations at city hall or on the campus, but the ordinary man in the Age of Affluence is beginning to find some greater sense of hope and peace and self-assurance expressed in a less acrimonious political style” (204). Reading this, one might remark that the celebration of empirical evidence seems to end exactly where the data fails to confirm the hypothesis.

In this reviewer’s assessment, the book’s value is primarily historical. That is to say, the theory of the decline of radical politics and of the actualization of the promise of democracy and prosperity for all is not borne out in reality. However, this does not make a text like this irrelevant. The striking insight one gleans from its content is that the validity of an interpretation ultimately depends on the theoretical framework within which social facts are explained. The proponents of the theory were responding to actual developments such as the rise in real wages in the US at the time. However, their conclusion that capitalism properly regulated by the welfare state would continue automatically to produce growth that benefits ev-
eryone was not only mistaken but mistaken because it grew out of a
mode of analysis that does not take economic structures as its start-
ing point. It would be wrong to view the advocates of the thesis of
the decline of ideology as nothing but academic mouthpieces of the
liberal establishment or of the apotheosis of capitalism “with a hu-
man face” because what they perceived was an actual weakening of
radicalism among the intelligentsia in the wake of the New Left and
especially throughout the 1980’s and 90’s. Thus, when Lipset pro-
nounced in 1960 that ideology, defined as a body of doctrines and as
opposed to popular resistance, he responded to a real phenomenon,
namely the distancing of the Western Left from Stalinism and tradi-
tional Marxism. However, his political biases and allegiances turned
these trends into props for the justification of post-New Deal liber-
alism and the celebration of the existing society as “the good society
itself in operation”. He read the increase in the power of labor in the
US as a lasting achievement and failed to anticipate the swinging of
the pendulum since 1970, the return of laissez-faire capitalism and
the far-reaching debilitation of US trade unions today. Lipset and
Bell believed that “the ideological issues dividing left and right had
been reduced to a little more than or a little less government owner-
ship and economic planning” (48) and that “the democratic struggle
will continue, but it will be a fight without ideologies, without red
flags, without May Day parades” (ibid.). Mannheim, it seems, had
distinguished correctly between ideology and utopia: ideas that serve
to defend the status quo and ideas that seek to transcend it. The
end-of-ideology theorists were most certainly not utopians.

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