The Routledge Handbook of Ethnic Conflict
Second edition
Karl Cordell, Stefan Wolff

Modernity, nationalism and ideology

Publication details
Daniele Conversi
Published online on: 28 Jan 2016

How to cite: Daniele Conversi. 28 Jan 2016, Modernity, nationalism and ideology from: The Routledge Handbook of Ethnic Conflict, Second edition Routledge
Accessed on: 28 Oct 2019

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT
MODERNITY, NATIONALISM AND IDEOLOGY

Daniele Conversi

Introduction

As with other socio-political terms, there is no universally agreed definition of ideology in social theory and political science and the concept remains a broadly contested one. In contrast, nationalism can be more easily defined as a modern ideological movement constructed around a self-defined nation and aiming at controlling the state and its ancillary political institutions within a bounded territorial space. In Anthony D. Smith’s classical definition, nationalism is ‘an ideological movement to attain and maintain autonomy, unity and identity on behalf of a population, some of whose members conceive it to constitute an actual or potential “nation”’. It is an active movement inspired by an ideology and symbolism of the nation’ (Smith 1999: 256; 2009: 61; 2010: 9). Elsewhere, Smith reiterates that ideology is a key element in the success of nationalism as ‘it serves to unify and focus the many grievances and aspirations of different social groups within a particular community or state, and to explain to and activate “the people”’ (Smith 1998: 116).

However, its main constituent, the term ‘nation’, is probably so slippery and self-referential as to defy any attempt at an ‘objective’ definition. For Smith, a nation is ‘a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members’ (Smith 1991: 14). However, this attempt at a definition encounters renowned operational problems. Elsewhere, I have stressed how stateless nations may lack the public, let alone mass, culture, necessary to be included in the above definition, neither can they enjoy a ‘common economy’ or ‘legal rights and duties’ for all, or most, of their members (Conversi 2006). These attributes are most often attached to the ‘nation-state’, a term which in itself derives from the previous affirmation of nationalism and its capture of the state (Connor 1994). Moreover the very term ‘nation’ lends itself to multiple interpretations in various European languages (Hroch and Malecková 2000). Given the vacuity and fruitlessness of attempting to pin down the nation as a unified concept, it is worth concentrating our efforts on the study of nationalism instead.

In this chapter, we shall see that nationalism can be primarily identified as an ideological movement and that ideology plays a central role in its initial formation and further diffusion. Interestingly, the origins of ideology and nationalism can be both traced back to the French Revolution: while the genesis of the term ‘nationalism’ is an issue of relative contention, the
initial use of the term ‘ideology’ can be historically ascribed to the Lockean liberal aristocrat philosopher Antoine Destutt de Tracy: His *Eléments d’idéologie* (Destutt de Tracy 1970 [1805]) attempted to identify a positivist ‘science of ideas’ founded on the centrality of human sensations in the development of knowledge (Head 1985; Kennedy 1978). However, Napoleon transformed it into a pejorative term of abuse parodying de Tracy’s followers as ‘the ideologues’. Napoleon condemned ideology as an ambiguous doctrine that would undermine the rule of law, seeing ‘in the thought of de Tracy a threat to his authority’ (Eccleshall 1994: 4). Napoleon’s usage subsequently eclipsed the original meaning of the term ideology to the point that even Karl Marx, who identified de Tracy as a reactionary bourgeois, used the term in a purely disparaging way, a use continuing up to Foucault and Deleuze (Malešević and Mackenzie 2002).

The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives several definitions of ideology, beginning with ‘a system of ideas or ideals, especially one that forms the basis of economic or political theory or policy’ (*OED* 1997: 908). Therefore, a relationship between ideology and political action needs to be established. This chapter describes generally ideology as a set of ideas articulated around a socio-political programme devised by specific individuals, which we may recognize occasionally as ‘the ideologues’ and, until recently, could be identified as ‘intellectuals’. Today, they appear to us most often as media pundits.

What is ideology and what is it not? The reply mostly depends on the replier. Protean concepts like modernity, progress, development and, the latest arrival, globalization are imbued with ideology, yet not all scholars and social commentators promptly recognize this status. Although the way these terms are used implies adherence to ideological constructs and platforms, chrono-centrism prevents identifying them as ideologies. From the promontory of the present time, we can look backward and discern ideology where our forefathers simply saw the natural order of things, but in our day it may be more difficult to see the wood for the trees.

The term ideology can be used in two possible ways: one neutral, the other critical or pejorative (Thompson 1990: 56). While the critical use is implicit in any analytical study of ideology, is a neutral approach at all possible? Indeed, it may be difficult to ‘stand by’ and see ideology in purely objective terms, since scholarly endeavours are also informed by ideology. Most often, ideology is enriched by passion. As knowingly synthesized by the poet, film director and social analyst Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922–1975), it stems directly from passion: ‘Passion, analytical in itself, gives way to ideology, synthetic in its nature’ (*La passione, per sua natura analitica, lascia il posto all’ideologia, per sua natura sintetica*) (Pasolini 1994: 493).

Most scholars of nationalism agree that ideology is paramount to the creation and reproduction of nationalism, although they accord different degrees to its centrality. An illustrious exception was Ernst Gellner, who disagreed with the importance of ideology. Gellner (2006) argued that nationalism needs neither intellectuals nor an ideology, since nationalism was a semi-spontaneous response generated *ex-machina* by a fragmented social system disrupted by the uneven impact of industrialization – although he recognized that nationalism developed first in the West. More commonly, Elie Kedourie (1993) regarded nationalism as a fully fledged ideology spreading across the world via aping and imitation. Kedourie, Gellner and Smith are representative of various ‘schools’ of thought concerned with the origins of nations and the nature of nationalism. Kedourie’s explanation is entirely centred on ideology; Gellner radically excludes its importance, whereas Smith adopts a more nuanced position seeing the role of nationalist ideology as shaped by pre-existing myths and symbols.

Before considering the relationship between nationalism and ideology, we should understand what is broadly meant by ideology, what is not, and why not. Beside liberalism and conservatism, communism, socialism and fascism have been named as emblematic twentieth-
Modernity, nationalism and ideology

century ideologies. Capitalism is more often seen as a socio-political system founded on the adoption of market economy principles. It is less generally accepted as an ideology and is thus often subsumed as a practice of liberalism – jointly with its ideological sub-varieties: laissez-faire capitalism, radical capitalism, and corporate capitalism. Yet, the very belief in capitalism as the ideal, standard socio-political system, as well as the panacea for all sorts of social problems, rests on firm ideological grounds. Many have idealized capitalism as the most perfect and unmatchable socio-economic model, indeed as the only possible one. Susan Sontag acutely observed that ‘the ideology of capitalism makes us all into connoisseurs of liberty – of the indefinite expansion of possibility’ (Sontag 1989: 77; 2013).

Other unsuspected candidates to the category of ideology proliferate: The US-led ‘war on terror’, justifying ends and means, was shaped as an ideology of a good and virtuous (American) society fighting against ‘evil’ (Conversi 2010b). In the USA, the very notion of Manifest Destiny can be read as an overarching ideology consistently and systematically utilized as a ‘cover story’ for the establishment and continuance of the ‘colonial triad of settlers, Indigenous peoples, and slaves’ (McCoy 2014).

In fact, these visions were formulated within, and as responses to, the crises brought about in different stages and periods by the end of an era. However termed: agricultural society, the Ancien Régime, the Dark Ages, or by some other name: by opposition to the latter, the term modernism encompasses all those world visions which fully embraced modernity and its consequences. It seeks to conceive new scenarios of ‘togetherness’ and competing political projects based on the full acceptance and endorsement of modernity. Modernism has thus been articulated through a set of often-incompatible ideas whose socio-political programme was predicated on a (Western-centred) vision of modernity as the supreme good, and hence on the rejection of elements which, according to its competing ideological foundations, could be perceived as ‘anti-modern’. The cult of modernity, progress and development became the idée fixe of the industrial and post-industrial age. In short, modernism has permeated not only all other ideologies, including nationalism, liberalism, fascism and communism, but also every major aspect of modern social life. In a nutshell, modernists predicate that all that is modern is positive, while all that is ‘anti-modern’ needs to be rejected. Given that both Nazism and Stalinism viewed themselves as modernizing ideologies, we can figure out what could it mean then to find oneself at the wrong side of the ‘modern/anti-modern’ spectrum.

Modernist ideology is often encapsulated in the popular myth of the ‘mad scientist’, who, blinded by an absolute faith in progress, crafts Frankenstein-like monsters in his secluded laboratory. The ‘mad scientist’ paradigm operates within a set of beliefs which are often a radical and gross interpretation of prevailing visions of modernity, while it is often erroneously interpreted as a personal ambition verging on pathology and emanating from individual attitudes. But similar attitudes did not emerge casually in a post-religious, particularly post-Christian, world. They were part and parcel of the prevailing Zeitgeist unleashed by the advent of Western-style modernity. Here I intend to stress the link between the notions of modernity, progress and nationalism. In fact, modernism as the ideology of progress is deeply related to nationalism. For Liah Greenfeld (1992) it is impossible to conceive modernity outside nationalism, since the latter provided the ideological forge and mould to shape the former. Modernity is simply unthinkable outside a non-nationalist world, so that nationalism ‘represents the cultural foundation of modern social structure, economics, politics, international relations, education, art, science, family relation, and so on and so forth’ (Greenfeld 2006a: 162; 2013). However, the opposite can also be said in that modernism is seen as the structural foundation of all of the above. The totalizing nature of nationalism overlaps hence with the doubly totalizing nature of modernity. For this reason, one can legitimately suspect
that Greenfeld is speaking about the ideology of modernity, rather than the ideology of nationalism – even though she seems to reject a clear-cut distinction between the two.

**Modernity, nationalism and ideology**

The term ‘modernism’ has different meanings in various fields: so, among art historians, it is notably used to describe an artistic movement that emerged in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe. In this chapter, ‘modernism’ refers to a wider ideological category, which sees modernity as the founding parameter of a new era implicitly defined by the belief in unlimited progress. This has remained the dominant ideology and paradigm at least till the beginning of the twenty-first century and it is probably the most popular ideology across the world. Modernism thoroughly accompanied the growth of nationalism and, in most cases, preceded it – although Greenfeld asserts that nationalism preceded modernity and indeed it acted as its midwife.

For most scholars of nationalism and modernity, the *incipit* of both remains the French Revolution, which is also when the term ideology was first coined. The doctrine of nationalism was officially formulated in the *Declaration of the Rights of Man*, its public display of symbols touched off with the *Fête de la Fédération* in the Summer of 1790 and its definitive test occurred in the battlefield at Valmy (1792). Before the French Revolution, the propaganda apparatus of absolute monarchs was largely confined to the upper elites and exercised via the Courts, as loci of aggregation and public display of Royal paraphernalia aiming to ‘seduce’ or coopt provincial elites. Absolute sovereigns increasingly appropriated religious symbolism to prop up their legitimacy via appeals to their subjects, particularly under Louis XIV, the *roi soleil*. At those times, ideology was still largely overlapping with religion. Although the primary movers and motives have not been clearly identified, the St Bartholomew’s Eve massacres against Huguenots (Protestants) in Paris (1572) indicated an obsession by ruling elites with the power of socio-religious ideas. The targets were not cultural or religious differences *per se* but ‘ideological’ opposition and dissent, as heterodox communities were considered dangerous by ruling elites (Conversi 2012b).

With modernity, secular ideology seized the state in ‘absolute’ terms. The targets were no longer framed in purely religious terms, but in terms of their entropy or counter-entropy (Gellner 2006), that is, their cultural compatibility or incompatibility with an increasingly centralized, expanding and control-freak state. To the most radical of Jacobins, cultural difference became anathema. Under the French revolution, the physical extermination of ideological-cultural opponents was pursued within a new ‘national’ framework, which slowly evolved into a broader drive to ‘nationalize’ the masses (Conversi 2007; 2012b) Nihilism itself originated in French revolutionary discourse and, since then, the conviction that modernity is essentially nihilistic informs some of the most influential strands of philosophical, political, and aesthetic modernism (Weller 2011). Since the French Revolutionary wars, in particular after the French victory at Valmy, ideology became essential in the way wars were to be fought over the next two centuries (Conversi 2015). After years of ideological emphasis on the sacrality of *La Patrie* (the Fatherland), French citizens began slowly to identify with the soldier as the supreme expression of collective will, viewing war as the finest of national virtues (Lynn 1996: 121). Even before the *levée en masse*, volunteers were drafted in through an array of visual effects and media grandeur, often surrounded by a festival atmosphere punctuated by martial music (Ozouf 1988).

The systematic mass killing by government troops also led some historians to identify the *Vendée* massacres (1793–6) as the first modern genocide (Conversi 2012b; Levene 2008;
Most historians recognize the use of ideology and nationalism as mass propellers since the French Revolution. The destructive nature of European state-building was palpable to many citizens, yet patriotic-nationalist intoxication made opposition impossible. Thus, few intellectuals found the courage to denounce it, let alone oppose it. The ‘thinner’ ideology of anarchism developed largely in contrast to the practice of étatisme, whose ideological glue was provided by nationalism (see Ostergaard 1981; 1983). Intensively mobilized during periods of inter-state conflict, patriotism allowed the state to gain a foothold in society and penetrate areas from which it was initially excluded. Opposing the nation-state as an institution and patriotism as its legitimating belief, Leo Tolstoy linked both to organized violence (Christoyannopoulos 2008; Tolstoy 1926). If we look through the lenses of long-term historical processes, we can discern ‘the relative modernity of both nationalism and organized violence as both were generated by coercive bureaucratization and centrifugal ideologization’, thanks to the nation-state’s unprecedented capacity to penetrate embedded networks of ‘micro-solidarity’ (Malešević 2013a; 2013b: 197).

**Dominant nations, dominant ideologies and cultural hegemony**

The rapid demise of Marxism after 1989 has involved the abandonment of some important concepts, which can still be useful to socio-political analysis. In Marx’s analysis, ideology is part of the *superstructure*, nearly an accessory of the economic structure made of class relations. Yet, beyond this apparent blunder, Marxist scholars have refined the concept through the years, while still holding that ideology is forged by the bourgeoisie as a tool to convince members of other classes that the bourgeoisie’s interests are the interests of all. For Antonio Gramsci, the dominant classes establish *cultural hegemony* through patterns of consumptions, values, norms, habits, and so on (Gramsci 2011: 20 and 207). Cultural hegemony explains why the bourgeoisie can so easily enforce its models of ‘false consciousness’ amongst the working-class, whose interests should be rationally at odds with those of the bourgeoisie, but are side-lined in the name of inter-class allegiances, notably through consumerism and nationalism. In fact, nationalism shares the status of ‘false consciousness’ with other non-class related ideologies and practices, *in primis* the ‘fetishism of commodities’, so vital to maintaining the system of ‘class supremacy’ (Marx 2007: 81–96).

More recently, ideology has been defined as the way ‘in which meaning serves to sustain relations of domination’ (Thompson 1990: 58), specifically the domination of some classes over others. This ‘meaning’ needs to be synthesized and diffused through the articulation of ideas into a cohesive and viable ideology. In fact, once firmly established and enshrined in power relations, ideology is spread by means of mass manipulation. If seized by the state and the mainstream media, nationalism/patriotism can certainly become an ideology most suitable for the concentration of power into the hands of a few.

Most ideologies are embedded into political power, and the crucible of power in the modern era is the nation-state. The more controlling and authoritave the state is, the more pervasive its founding ideology, and vice versa. Althusser identifies a plurality of Ideological State Apparatuses, those ‘realities’ which ‘present themselves to the immediate observer in the form of distinct and specialised institutions’ and which function both via violence and ideology (Althusser 1971: 143). These are distinct from the unique (Repressive) State Apparatus holding sway alone over the public domain, yet the distinction between public and private ‘is a distinction internal to bourgeois law’, while ‘the State [controlled by the ruling class] … is “above the law” … [it] is neither public nor private; on the contrary, it is the precondition for any distinction between public and private’ (Althusser 1971: 144).
essential distinction is in fact that ‘the Repressive State Apparatus functions “by violence”’, whereas the Ideological State Apparatuses function “by ideology”’ (145, italics in the original). In accordance with what we have described so far, violence is opposed to ideology, yet there is an obvious complementarity between them.² An ideal model of supremely repressive State functioning purely by repressive measures is clearly impossible, so that violence and repression always need to be supplemented by ideology. Althusser brings forward the example of the Army and the Police which ‘also function by ideology both to ensure their own cohesion and reproduction, and in the “values” they propound externally’ (Althusser 1971: 145). On the other hand, a ‘pure’ Ideological State Apparatus cannot exist, as ideology also needs to be supplied by violence, even though this may be ‘very attenuated and concealed, even symbolic’. As various forms of nationalism always underpin the functioning of the modern state, its performance has been historically rooted in both violence and ideology. However, before seizing the state, nationalism is also expressed in a plurality of ‘Ideological State Apparatuses’, including trade unions, lawyers, physicians, lower and higher education, and the very family, where notions of common descent are actuated since early childhood. For Althusser, these apparatuses serve their purpose of reproducing the power of the bourgeoisie and reinforcing the capitalist system. He then explicitly relates nationalism to the communications apparatus ruled by the mass media, together with chauvinism, liberalism, moralism and economism (Althusser 1971: 154–155).

In terms much cruder than Gramsci, the Orwellian word ‘brainwashing’ as a strategy of mind control was coined to define a method of coercive persuasion widely used under Communism. The original Chinese term made it into English during the Korean War and its popularization is credited to the anti-communist intelligence agent Edward Hunter (1902–1978) (Seed 2004: 27–31; Taylor 2004: 3–6). Beyond its obsession with the spectre of ‘communist world domination’, Hunter’s Brain-washing in Red China (1951) became a classical crude description of how ideology-driven manipulation can radically alter the very identity of the individual and destroy her/his sense of the past.³ Such form of all pervasive control has been absorbed into daily routine and assumed as habitus by most citizens. To resume, China’s Ideological State Apparatus was used in full strength to instill the official ideology into the minds of citizens to the point of terminating previously existing sentiments, attitudes and world visions. Although during the Cold War only communist brainwashing became ‘worth’ considering, both Mao and Stalin operated through patriotic/nationalist mobilization, speaking in the name of the very subjects they oppressed, which can be even harder to oppose.

Is nationalism an ideology?

In the modern era, ideologies have become mass phenomena that moved millions of people: as such they have permeated most forms of thought, including scholarly thought. They have been often embraced with such an ardour and naive enthusiasm as to become avenues of fanaticism, self-immolation and mass suicide. After the end of the Second World War, the word ‘ideology’ was unsurprisingly discredited. Many observers at the time considered that competing ideologies had led to some of the worst human excesses in human history. Nationalism came in for particularly heavy criticism as it was claimed by some to be the direct ancestor of fascism in its various guises.

After the Second World War (later on, outside Europe), political ideologies were thus seen as mass propellers unleashing major human dislocations. Amongst them, it is customary to consider nationalism as a particularly powerful ideology destined to mobilize massive crowds. Unlike other ideologies, nationalism was rarely formulated through a coherent system of
thought and a precise programme. It lacked recognized foundational thinkers and its protean nature meant that it remained often parasitic of other ideologies, by simply adapting to them, while, of course, shaping them. Therefore, there are authors who consider nationalism as a dependent, weak form of ideology (see San Martin 2002). Postulating a distinction between fully fledged and ‘thin’ ideologies, Michael Freeden argues that nationalism ‘severs itself’ from a broader ideological agenda, while being incorporated into various ‘host’ ideologies. Like green thought and feminism, nationalism deliberately replaces and removes central concepts, thus being structurally unable ‘to offer complex ranges of argument, because many chains of ideas one would normally expect to find … are simply absent’ (Freeden 1998: 750). As its operational incapacity leads to a shrinking of the political dimension, nationalism is defined as a ‘thin-centered ideology’. Yet, it is still recognized as an ideology.

If nationalism is an ideology, either ‘thin’ or ‘fat’, is it plausible to see it, not merely as an ideology among others, but as the dominant ideology of the modern age? Indeed there is strong scope/reason for arguing so and for affirming that nationalism is ‘the dominant operative ideology of modernity’ since ‘nearly all contemporary socio-political orders … tend to legitimize their existence in nationalist terms’ (Malešević 2006: 317). This is in line with Smith’s assertion that in every continent ‘nationalism has become the main legitimating belief system’ (Smith 1998: 116) and Connor’s recognition of the centrality of nationalist ideology in legitimating power (Connor 2004). If nationalism is the ideology that underpins the nation-states’ system, then nationalism can be described as ‘the most successful ideology in human history’ (Billig 1995: 22). It is a convincing argument, but this chapter reformulates it by incorporating the wider ideological context within which nationalism first emerged and then thrived: This is the all-pervasive context of molecularly expanding modernity and the ideology of technocratic materialism and corporatism which accompanied it.

Inescapable asymmetries: nationalism, modernism and developmentalism

Modernity is founded on all-pervasive asymmetric concepts: on the one hand, the ‘modern’, the insider; on the other hand its antagonists, the ‘anti-modern’, the outsider. Modernist discourses are founded on self-concepts, antonyms and binary couples, like civilized vs. barbarians, modern vs. anti-modern, advanced vs. backward, developed vs. under-developed, progressive vs. reactionary, people vs. plebs, majorities vs. minorities, North vs. South, superior vs. inferior, and so on. Opposition constitutes the hub around which all modernist concepts emerge, coalesce and expand in multiple directions. In virtue of its unique capacity to articulate oppositional concepts into asymmetric incompatibilities, and as the key facilitator of modernity, nationalism becomes inherently homogenizing. The process of nationalizing spaces requires the othering of those who resist homogenization (Conversi 2008). At the same time, this process can lead to the extreme of constructing state ideologies focusing on one or more target groups as ‘anti-nation’ to the point of annihilation (Murray 2014).

From a discursive standpoint, asymmetrical concepts, self-concepts, and counter-concepts play a crucial part in the development of power-ridden political asymmetries – as identified by Reinhart Koselleck’s (1923–2006) and his historical semantics approach (Junge and Post-outenko 2011). They lie at the core of new attempts to understand the interaction between modernity and nationalism as homogenizing forces.

Asymmetric concepts are central to the building of the modernizing nation-state. In the past, the state’s developmental ambitions were envisioned as instrumental to nation-building. Because nation-building was conflated, and confused, with state-making, the formation of common
institutions was predicated on otherness and imbued with nationalist ideology. This often led to a fall of state legitimacy and hence a loss of control by the state (Guyot-Réchard 2013).

Modernism, like nationalism, is founded on the reiteration of asymmetrical concepts and it is thus an intrinsically exclusionary ideology. For modernists, modernity is largely defined against anti-modernity (reaction, obscurantism, etc.), rather than on its own. Prevailing notions of modernity are largely based on a (Western-centred) common-sense understanding of what is qualitatively and quantitatively modern. This is in turn based on a (Western-centred) common-sense understanding of what is not modern. Modernist notions like ‘progress’, ‘growth’, ‘advancement’ and ‘development’ were all-pervasive in the years leading to the First World War and totalitarianism. They were a central component of the predominant mindset let loose by the diffusion of Westernizing modernity (La Branche 2005; Latouche 1996). In the process, non-Western ideologies and world visions were discarded and destroyed, in short labelled as ‘anti-modern’. ‘Development’ itself became an ideology or, even more, a ‘global faith’ imposed by the West on an often recalcitrant world (Rist 2002). For Christopher Lasch (1991), with its belief in a linear, steady, indefinite rise in living standards as the inevitable destiny of mankind, the ‘faith in progress’ assumes the eschatological trappings of established religions.

Modernism assumed various forms: as a ‘right’ to which all citizens are entitled, or as a ‘must’ for state leaders to impose upon often reluctant populations. In its extreme forms, it became the ideology of development for development’s sake at whatever the costs. At such extremes, modernism can be re-defined as ‘developmentalism’. Far from being a secondary ideology, the latter has indeed accompanied nationalism and socialism well into the twentieth century, moving centre-stage with the advent of totalitarianism and its obsession with mass industrialization and the development of tightly controlled communication networks. This can be exemplified by Fritz Todt’s (1891–1942) ideology of road building as key to German economic strength and Gottfried Feder’s (1883–1941) Taylorist vision of technocracy as the ‘perfect’ society ruled by engineers. Turning citizens and peasants into pliable ‘masses’ through overwhelming state machines, totalitarian and post-totalitarian regimes justified destruction in the name of ‘progress’ and economic development. Extreme developmentalism, or the obsession with ‘catching up’ with the core countries of the wealthy West, irrespective of its human costs, was already visible in the ‘desperately modernizing’ drive of the Russian military before the Bolshevik revolution (Mann 2005: 99) or in the obsessive Westernizing trends emerging within the Ottoman Empire just before its collapse (Mann 2005: 114–119). More recently, the ideology of development allied with security concerns has been central in carrying out most contemporary genocides, notably in Rwanda (Uvin 1998; Verwimp 2000).

Later on in the twentieth century, Taylorism became an influential method of maximizing industrial efficiency and serializing mass production. The Soviet Union’s NEP (New Economic Policy) before 1928 belonged to a broader developmentalist crusade and Lenin’s embrace of Taylorism’s ‘scientific’ method was more than a means of discipline that could remould the worker and society along more controllable and regularized lines … Lenin encouraged the cult of Taylor and of another great American industrialist, Henry Ford, inventor of the egalitarian Model ‘T’, which flourished throughout Russia at this time: even remote villagers knew the name of Henry Ford (some of them believed he was a sort of god who organized the work of Lenin and Trotsky).

(Figes 2002: 463)
From a scientific method, Taylorism had become an ideology, indeed a faith, which was host of a broader ideology of progress. The ‘natural’ unit of reference for the ideology of progress was the nation, indeed the nation-state, remarkably so in the Soviet Union, where Wilsonian–Leninist principles of self-determination and popular sovereignty became the norm (Connor 2004: 34–37). The cult for discipline and work became part of a wider militarization of society which reached its peak later on under Stalin, as totalitarianism reinforced its global clench. Some radical Taylorists envisaged indeed ‘the mechanization of virtually every aspect of life … from methods of production to the thinking patterns of the common man’ (Figes 2002: 463).

Taylorism’s weight upon Hitler’s plans was even more substantial. By 1938, the over 2,000 km of German Autobahn network began to surpass in its extent the US highway system. The ideology of a highly inter-connected and powerful nation, envisioned as a unified living body, aimed at seducing every single citizen. Hitler’s idea of a Volkswagen (car of the people) dated back as early as 1933, owing much to Ford’s ‘Model T’. This is well beyond what elsewhere has been narrowly defined as ‘the paradox of reactionary modernist reconciliation’ (Herf 1986). In Italy, the avant-garde ideology of Futurism (1909–1945), with its idolatry for the machine, its cult of mass violence and its contempt for ordinary lives, produced the first artistic synthesis of all these trends (Conversi 2009a; Higuera 2011). In Turkey, the anti-traditionalist Westernizing drive of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk provided a unique model of modern völkisch state for European Nazi-Fascism: defying Western powers after Turkey’s defeat in the First World War, Atatürk’s rebellion in Ankara became a major Weimar media event in the early 1920s, the ‘star in the darkness’ which inspired the Hitlerputsch, while Hitler’s unconditional admiration for Atatürk led him to emulate his radical construction of a new nation (Ihrig 2014). Mussolini’s equally immense admiration for Atatürk was only nuanced by their mutual rivalry over the Dodecanese islands, which had been occupied by Italy after the Libyan war (1912–1945). In general, as I have argued, the stress on mass emotions and irrationality (including the rejection of Enlightenment rationalism) and the full embrace of modern technology were coeval and belong to the same world vision. They date back to the battle of Valmy and the birth of state-making nationalism with its radical, exclusive and unrivalled appropriation of ‘Vive la Nation!’ cries and easily stirred cheering crowds (Conversi 2015).

In his classic Seeing Like a State, James Scott uses the term ‘high modernism’ to question the success of the homogenizing, standardizing state founded on a hyper-modernist engineering ethos spread gradually outward to non-state spaces (Scott 1998). In contrast with interwar Europe, post-colonial elites appealed to rationality while focusing on the supposed welfare of the recipient populations: they designed it in order to ‘improve the human condition’ through dynamics of standardization, homogenization, and grid-making. Beyond the dirigisme of a centrally planned economy, the bureaucratic optics of high-modernism ‘occludes the social and cultural worlds both of marginalized citizenries and of the bureaucrats themselves’ through reductionism and a self-proclaimed ‘cult of efficiency’ (Herzfeld 2005). This applies not only to developmentalist states as repositories of power, but also to neo-liberal economies and unhindered global corporations. Scott discusses this as a failure, perhaps overemphasizing the capacity of popular resistance to state-planned improvement schemes (Scott 1985). But the historical record shows that authoritarian regimes met with scant resistance and rarely with vocal opposition.

The concept of developmental state or developmental dictatorship can be useful in this respect and it has been systematically applied to the cases of Italy’s Fascism (Gregor 1979) Spain’s Francoism (Saz Campos 2004), and Japanese-occupied Manchuria in 1931–1945 (Murakami
A national-developmentalist ideology underpins nearly all totalitarian systems, whose regimes attempted to shape a new man as the ideal citizen ready to inhabit the promised land of a new industrialist utopia. Soviet and Maoist propaganda posters depicted the advent of mass industrialization in superbly idealized terms, as the gateway to a new millennium. Nazi-Fascist regimes shared with Socialist-Communist ones variants of a Western-centred ideology of development while paying lip service to ‘tradition’ and honouring the ‘fathers’ of the nation. Totalitarian systems marred nationalism and ideologies of progress in quasi-religious, mythopoietic terms (Griffin 2007). An extreme, rather than moderate, modernist ideology was the main common denominator amongst all these regimes and surpassed by a long way the already commanding prominence of nationalism and patriotism.

Progress, modernization and development are social concepts associated with power and thus conceal the traits of ideological dominance. Indeed, being more pervasive and ‘material’ than other ideologies, modernism can be described as the dominant ideology of the modern times. As progress and related concepts became intrinsic attributes of the nation, they were fully appropriated by nationalism. A step further, Greenfeld (1992) suggests that they cannot even be conceived in a world without nations and outside nationalism.

I have defended the general view that nationalism cannot be conceived outside modernity, but only to identify modernity itself as embedded in its own ideology, modernism. Let us now relate the above to what nationalism studies have so far produced on this relationship. Although for most scholars nationalism is indistinguishable from modernity, others argue that modernity provided only a catalyst for pre-existing groups to seize power or negotiate power-sharing arrangements through representative leaders. For some authors, nationalism was no mere chaperon of modernity, but it provided a congenial tool to impose modernization and spread the ideology of progress among the masses: in the footsteps of Hans Kohn, Liah Greenfeld (1992; 2006b; 2013) argues that ideas were central to the birth and spread of nationalism. This is a view shared by political philosophers, like Kenneth Minogue, and historians of ideas, like Elie Kedourie. Greenfeld also argues that nationalism was essential to the propagation of the ‘spirit of capitalism’ (Greenfeld 2001).

Intellectuals and the media: from ideology to imagology

Intellectuals play a different role at different times and in different countries. A clue of their importance can be found in the way their freedom of speech is restrained by incumbent regimes. How do governments react to the activity and writing of intellectuals able to articulate some form of uncomfortable political opposition? The murder of Anna Politkovskaia (2006), Sergei Protazanov (2009), Natalia Estemirova (2009) and other Russian activists points to the central role of the writer in articulating ideas about freedom in Russian politics and society. It also underlines the government’s fear of losing control of the official discourse and the ruthless way the citizen is supervised by exercising absolute jurisdiction over the public sphere. Similarly in Tajikistan 50 to 80 journalists were killed from 1990 to 2000, in a period in which glasnost and perestroika were just beginning to create a liberal press (Allison 2006; see also Atkin 1995).

Situated in between the media pundit and the fully fledged intellectual, the figure of the journalist has a specific impact in early stages of democratization, when the written word may still enjoy a greater influence than the unmediated image. The stance articulated by the murdered Russian writers was powerful enough to warrant their elimination, also because it was framed in highly non-nationalist terms and advocated universal human rights transcending nationhood. Quite the opposite can be said of the nationalist raison d’État of the murderers,
since Putin’s exploit of state patriotism has affected minorities; non-nationalists, universalists, human rights activists and rival Russian nationalists as well.

The intellectuals have often played a central role in nationalism studies, beginning with the work of Carlton Hayes and, to a lesser extent, Hans Kohn. As we have seen, Elie Kedourie places intellectuals at the core of his explanation of the spread of nationalism. From an original emphasis on the role of intellectuals, Anthony D. Smith has subsequently nuanced their centrality, because nationalist ideologies are

not simply the product of intellectuals, nor are most intellectuals ... free-floating and disoriented, nor are most of them able to exercise the kind of influence that Kedourie attributes to them. The same is true of their ideas, which are effective in society to the extent that they mesh with pre-existing popular notions and collective memoirs. Only then can they mobilize large numbers of people.

(Smith 1998: 116)

However, ethnosymbolism dismisses elites’ manipulation outright, so that the dynamics of power are not laid bare or critically discussed. On the other hand, intellectuals played a key role in the passage from ethnie to nation (Conversi 2006).

Yet what does the word ‘intellectual’ mean? Which are its contours? How sophisticated does a nationalist intellectual need to be? How refined and deep the ideas to be propagated? The founder of Basque nationalism, Sabino Arana y Goiri (1865–1903), was not a champion of finesse and could scarcely articulate his thoughts in a coherent, let alone pleasant, way. Reading his Obras Completas (Complete Works) is a daunting task, as the collection is replete with vehement interjections, caustic tirades and ranting sermons interspersed with slang and xenophobic epithets. Yet, Arana’s work was central to the success of Basque nationalism, with long-term repercussions on its subsequent evolution (Conversi 1997). What matters is the founding intellectual(s)’ organizational capacity. In spite of his limited vocabulary and incapacity to enunciate in-depth observations, Arana was certainly an excellent agit-prop, an orator and haranguer perfectly capable of perorating the Basque cause amongst a small coterie in which he emerged as the charismatic catalyst. Such managerial ability also derived from his ability to communicate in the language of the people and from his ability to mobilize the founding myths of Basque nationalism (Douglass 2004). Basque nationalism owed most of its visual symbols and values to Arana. Considering that he died at the young age of 33, Arana’s achievement was immense: he single-handedly formulated the first Basque nationalist programme, coined the country’s name (Euskadi), defined its geographical extension, founded its first political organization, wrote its anthem and designed its flag (Conversi 1997: 53). All these required impeccable organizational skills and a total dedication to the cause. Thus, in spite of his hidebound and paltry educational qualifications, Arana could be described as an ‘intellectual’ because he was able to articulate and marshal the national aspirations of his followers. This can be visualized as a boundary-building enterprise: Arana’s goal was to create, re-create, and reinforce the boundary between Basques and non-Basques, that is, to define a modern Basque identity. Frenetic, compulsive boundary-building was indeed one of the core elements of the epochal changes brought about by modernization and modernism (Conversi 2014).

Nowadays, the surrogate ‘intelligentsia’ is centred around media operatives – those who need more appearance than brain, and those whose subliminal passages have direct impact on human thought and actions. Does this mean that nationalism can today subsist without intellectuals? Is ideology possible or even thinkable without intellectuals? A passage from Milan Kundera’s novel, Immortality, can shed light on this question:
we can rightfully talk of a gradual, general, planetary transformation of ideology into imagology … All ideologies have been defeated: in the end their dogmas were unmasked as illusions and people stopped taking them seriously … Reality was stronger than ideology. And it is in this sense that imagology surpassed it: imagology is stronger than reality, which has anyway long ceased to be what it was for my grandmother, who lived in a Moravian village and still knew everything through her own experience: how bread is baked, how a house is built, how a pig is slaughtered and the meat smoked, what quilts are made of, what the priest and the schoolteacher think about the world; … she had, so to speak, personal control over reality.

(Kundera 1992: 126–127, my italics)

In their triumphant path towards the conquest of hearts and minds, dominant ideas have regularly been accompanied by powerful images. Images serve to convey rational, irrational and non-rational messages by using emotional styles and instinctive methods. In an era dominated by one-way, or unidirectional, media, most notably the radio and television, these images have become increasingly simple (the internet is not necessarily unidirectional, allowing the user a margin of self-determination and sometimes the possibility to interact and respond). In the passage from ideology to imagology, forms of banal nationalism have rapidly spread without the mediation of intellectuals and without the need for soliciting critical thought. This led to a global impoverishment of politics and the rise of ‘banal’ forms of mass mobilization though artificial simulation (Simons 2000). In practice, the reign of image belongs to a ‘hyper-reality’ which merges reality with fantasy (Baudrillard 1994: 1–42), as well as an all-encompassing ideology no longer mediated by intellectuals. Thus, the answer to the opening question is that in technologically advanced postmodern societies intellectuals may indeed become redundant, despite the fact that ideology permeates society at all levels. In various ways, the totalitarian nightmare of a homogeneous world order deprived of critical thought, yet firmly grounded on ideology, risks becoming a reality in the wake of neo-liberal globalization. Where the iron fist of totalitarianism failed, the velvet glove of globalization seems on the verge of succeeding. Yet, nationalism and ethnic conflict seem to expand with global homogenization, either as a reaction to it or as its ‘natural’ companion.

Why have intellectuals become redundant in a media-dominated, ‘post-critical’ world? Part of the answer lies in the rise of banal nationalism. As we have seen, a purely mentalist definition of ideology is no longer commonly accepted. Ideology is rather seen as encompassing a variety of current pre-reflexive manifestations, including behaviour, attitudes and patterns of consumption. For Michael Billig (1995), even the pettiest manifestations of nationhood are based on nationalist ideology: We are deeply steeped in a nationalized world vision, thus becoming unconscious carriers and replicators of nationalist ideology, whether we accept or reject nationalism in principle. Typical examples are those who ‘restrict the term “nationalism” to the ideology of “others”’ (Billig 1995: 16). By sin of omission, the very fact of nationalizing (i.e., attributing blame of nationalism to) others, particularly stateless nations, implies a certain degree of nationalist performance. As with other ideologies, its proponents can easily detect its shadow elsewhere, but not at home. ‘Subconscious’ nationalism is also common in mainstream academia: when scholars quote approvingly Ernest Renan’s famous defence of the ‘nation de volonté’ (nation of will) smuggling it as an example of ‘civic’, or even ‘civilized’, nationalism, they are not simply espousing an ideological stand, but also tacitly endorsing a nationalist-inspired vision, which is ultimately gauged towards exclusion.
Whereas Billig focuses on the daily ideology of banal nationalism, Althusser focuses on the untold, which he calls *lacunar discourse*; things are merely suggested rather than openly enounced. Indeed, ideology-supporting discourse does often work by changing the meanings of terms: The revolutionary triad *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* also served to underpin its opposite: unfreedom, inequality, and conflict. The most nationalist of the triad, *fraternité*, was the last one to be added, with its emotional and communitarian stress on kin-related moral obligations (Ozouf 1997: 4353–4389). Nationalism seems to advocate strong egalitarian values proclaiming the equality of all citizens or, rather, all the members of the nation. However, this ‘equality’ is largely fictitious and, once seized by the state, the concept is usually usurped to promote more demanding forms of surreptitious inequality (Conversi 2008). In times of war and under mass conscription, ‘equality’ is to be paid by ordinary citizens with their own lives: war demands that ultimate sacrifice is made on the basis of citizens’ equality, although informed citizens may know well that the rich usually bribe their way out of war.

Finally, a whole set of irreflexive habits can be thought as expression of ideology. As externally induced behaviour, consumerism may not be perceived as an ideology in itself, but as part of a collective inclination to equate personal satisfaction with the incessant pursuit of material possessions. Already in 1899, the US sociologist Thorstein Veblen (1857–1929) identified patterns of ‘conspicuous consumption’, that is, the act of spending money for the sake of appearance and for attaining or maintaining social status – even though the phenomenon was quantitatively less pronounced before the era of mass consumerism. With the expansion of homogeneous global consumption patterns since at least the 1970s, the ideological aspects of the process seem to have passed unnoticed. Yet, systematic attempts to oppose consumerism and other behavioural ‘-isms’ are likely to be perceived in terms of ideology. For instance, *enoughism*, a set of recently proposed practices and lifestyles based on ideas for a better world, is clearly dedicated to defeating consumerism in both ideology and practice (Naish 2008).

Globalism, nationalism and ideology

In the 1960s, the ‘end of ideology’ was prematurely announced anticipating a new era liberated from the dogmas of socialism, liberalism and conservatism (Bell 1960). Over half a century on, some of these conjectures have seemingly materialized, finding a suitable symbolism in the fall of the Berlin Wall. But, whether or not an end of all ideologies really took place during the age of ‘reflux’, those vast socio-political changes are still firmly set within a greater ideological narrative: modernity. Moreover, nationalism remained with us and, as we all know, its appeal continues to develop.

The ostensibly ‘paradoxical’ relationship between globalization and nationalism has been stated and restated countless times. Likewise, various reasons have been indicated as the main culprits for this ‘unexpected’ outcome. One of them is the demise of cultural certainties and traditions ensuing from the process of global homogenization. It is still highly debatable whether globalization has actually bolstered cultural exchanges and *métissage*, or whether, rather, it has limited inter-ethnic relations to superficial domains by filtering inter-cultural contacts through the lenses of Westernization – or indeed Americanization (Conversi 2009b; 2010a; 2012a).

The copious and repetitive literature on globalization has so far failed to produce any ground-breaking text, even in the form of a journal article. The very term ‘globalization’ appears increasingly undefined, hard to grasp and shrouded in conceptual ambiguity, with some authors pushing its meaning back to Portugal’s imperial expansion or even to the times...
of the Roman Empire, thus making it scholarly inoperative. Historically, the concept’s current usage emerged in the wake of the global imposition of neo-liberalism as ‘the ideology of the Washington consensus’ (Callinicos 2003: 149).

There is an ongoing debate as to whether globalization is part of an ideology, an ideology in itself, or rather a mere economic/cultural fact. For William Greider, globalization is not ideology, but naked power: ‘The great, unreported story in globalization is about power, not ideology. It’s about how finance and business regularly continuously insert their own self-interested deals and exceptions into rules and agreements that are then announced to the public as “free trade”’ (Greider 2000). For others, globalization is a new phase of particularly harmful and penetrating imperialism and some see it as deeply related to war (Barkawi 2006). Finally, others see its hidden agenda as implying a total restructuring of power relations throughout the world with the dramatic potential of unleashing ‘a tide of global resentment’ (Smith 2006).

However, in line with what we have said, globalization was also accompanied by the all-pervasive ideology of globalism. In other words, globalization, the actual practice, should be distinguished from globalism, its accompanying ideology – which is tacitly assumed by many scholars working in the area of globalization. For Manfred B. Steger globalism not only is ‘a new ideology, but also constitutes the dominant ideology of our time against which all of its challengers must define themselves’ (Steger 2002: 11). This is reflected in the all-pervasive hyper-productivism framing all sorts of economic relations, including the global food system (Rosin 2014). Ideological articulations of the ‘public good’ and appeals to industrial development provided the legitimating ground for various forms of exclusion and disposessions under both state-led developmentalism and neo-liberalism. Yet, the globalist ‘land broker states’ have proven ‘unable to achieve the ideological legitimacy of their predecessor’, leading to more widespread conflicts over land (Levien 2013). The rhetoric is unmistakably pragmatic, acting in the name of promoting ‘social justice’, now kindly provided by the market as the new elected means to development. Yet, resistance to nationalist developmentalism has emerged as part of a broader cross-class and international series of movements expressed in a host of local variants, like resistance movement against coal power plants, dam construction and depletion of groundwater sources in Turkey (Arsl, Bengi and Adaman 2015; Kadirbeyoglu 2010), protest against mining corporations’ attempts to develop open-cast cyanide leach gold mine in Transylvania (Velicu 2012), projects of urban gentrification and ‘megagentrification’ (Lees 2012), repressive forms of militaristic developmentalism in India’s northeastern regions (Ningthoujam 2013), and so on. In all these cases the downsized state that emerged from neo-liberal globalization has played a nationalist-development card similar to its high modernist predecessor, although it has allowed for the articulation of a certain level of dissent.

If globalism is an ideology, is it a variant, indeed a deepening, of the ideology of modernism? Given the latter’s relationship with nationalism, we should not be surprised to see patriotic and ethnic conflict accompanying both. Ultimately, the answer depends on whether we chose to consider globalization as a new, and more radical, phase of modernization, or as an entirely new departure from it, as argued by post-modernists.

Some scholars, who years before had anticipated and celebrated the end of ideology, found nothing to rejoice in in the new era as they discovered that corruption had largely replaced ideology on a global scale (Bell 1993). After the Cold War, unconstrained American rule over world politics, economy, law and culture became the norm and its consequences upon daily practices, attitudes and lifestyles will permeate contemporary ideology for generations to an extent which still needs to be fully weighed up.

Daniele Conversi
Conclusions

Although ideologies are central to the study of nationalism, there has been disagreement about whether or not nationalism is truly an ideology. However, it is an undeniable fact that nationalism is associated with modernity and, as I have argued, modernity in itself is based on the ideology of modernism. We have seen how nationalism can be either described as the dominant ideology of modernity, or as one among many modern ideologies. If nationalism is freeloading on other ideologies, which is then the core ideology around which it gravitates?

Whereas most scholars agree that nationalism developed in tandem with modernity, few have considered modernity as conveyed by its own specific ideology. None of the major nationalism scholars identifies the possibility that nationalism can indeed be host to the wider ideology of modernism, since the latter is rarely identified as such.

By articulating specific projects for action, ideologies can become modern tools for mass domination, particularly when seized by incumbent regimes. They are distinguished from other forms of manipulation by their reliance on political thought and action, obedience to a set of principles, and the embodiment of related ideas in symbols, myths and rituals. As we have seen, this implies that our daily lives are unconsciously permeated by ideological content, including many routine habits that we may perceive as ‘facts’.

This chapter has asserted the following points: a definition of ideology cannot be conceived in purely mentalist terms and needs to incorporate more general dispositions, particularly the dimension of habitus and unreflective behaviour. At any rate, nationalism is an ideology, either ‘thin’ or ‘banal’. Indeed, it is the most powerful ideology of the modern age and it may even be its defining ideology. But modernity itself needs to be reconceived and redefined as an ideology and, in order for this to be achieved, the term modernism has been used and explored here.

Notes

1 As for the ideological state apparatuses, ‘it is unimportant whether the institutions in which they are realized are “public” or “private”. What matters is how they function’ (Althusser 1971: 144).
2 ‘No class can hold State power over a long period of time without at the same time exercising its [cultural] hegemony over, and in, the State Ideological Apparatuses’ (Althusser 1971: 146, original in italics).
3 Recently the brain-washing metaphor has been extended to ‘deep capitalism’ and cultural Americanization. Conveyed through films and fictions, brain-washing has slowly mutated ‘from an external threat to American values to an internal threat against individual American liberties by the U.S. government’ (Seed 2004: 1).
4 Indeed, its roots go back to Weimar and earlier: Germany’s ‘three mandarin thinkers’, Heidegger, Schmitt and Freyer, all devoted numberless pages to the issue of technological supremacy. Before handing in his resignation as rector of the University of Freiburg (1934), Martin Heidegger had advocated Nazi ideology and Germany’s urgent need to combine Technik and Kultur (Herf 1986: 109).
5 Enoughism, not inevitably a branch of green thought, is a quintessential cosmopolitan ideology, where the concern for the nation is wholly subordinated to that for the ecumene. In this sense, it belongs to a large group of universalist ideologies which aim to provide an alternative to nationalism, as well as to consumerism.

Further reading


References


