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[Introduction to] Ideals and Ideologies: A Reader

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IDEALS AND IDEOLOGIES A READER

NINTH EDITION

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INTRODUCTION

As the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent “war on terror” attest, the world in which we live continues to be shaped and scarred by political ideologies. Indeed, the truth of the old saying “ideas have consequences” must now be evident to everyone. More recently, the Great Recession that began in 2007 has exposed and deepened divisions between those who believe that government has a duty to regulate the economy and those who hold that government “interference” in markets is dangerous and counterproductive. For better or for worse, the twenty-first century, like the one that preceded it, is a century of ideas—and particularly of those clusters or systems of ideas called “ideologies.” These ideologies have raised hopes, inspired fear, and drawn blood from millions of human beings. To study political ideologies, then, is not to undertake a merely academic study. It is to dissect and analyze the tissue of our times.

As we enter the second decade of the twenty-first century, some ideologies, such as the Marxist-Leninist version of socialism, are clearly in eclipse, while others—such as radical Islamism and a newly emerging ecological or “green” ideology—appear to be gaining in influence and importance. Yet, despite their differences, these ideologies are similar in at least one respect: they all have their histories. All, that is, have emerged out of particular historical contexts and have changed in response to changing conditions and circumstances. And all have been formed from the ideas of thinkers old and new. As the economist John Maynard Keynes observed in the 1930s, when Benito Mussolini, Adolf Hitler, and Joseph Stalin all held power, “madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back.”

This book is about, and by, those “academic scribblers”—and a number of those “madmen in authority” as well. Their ideas have formed the ideologies and fueled the conflicts that shaped and reshaped the political landscape of the 20th century—and now the 21st. We live in the shadow, and under the influence, of these scribblers and madmen. To be ignorant of their influence is not to escape it. By tracing modern ideologies back to their original sources, we can see more clearly how our own outlooks—and those of our enemies—have been shaped by earlier thinkers. To return to and read these authors is to gain some insight into the shaping of the modern political mind—or rather minds, plural, since ideological disagreement continues unabated.

Some modern commentators have claimed—wrongly, we believe—that ideological disagreements are at last coming to an end. The age of ideology, they say, is over.

As evidence, they cite the end of the Cold War, the emancipation of Eastern Europe, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the democratizing of former dictatorships. Important as they are, however, these events do not presage “the end of ideology.” Rather, they suggest that ours is an age of important ideological realignments. Marxism–Leninism may be dead in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, but other versions of it linger on in the politics of China, Vietnam, North Korea, and Cuba. Radical Islamism is increasingly influential in the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and elsewhere. And, of course, ideological conflict persists as conservatives, liberals, and socialists continue to disagree with one another, animal liberationists fight for animal rights, gays for gay rights, and Greens campaign to protect the environment. The worldwide financial crisis that began in 2007 cast grave doubt on the deregulation of markets championed by libertarians and modern conservatives whose movements are, for the moment at least, in partial eclipse. Other movements, motivated by other ideologies, are poised to challenge and perhaps replace them.

Like it or not, in short, ours is likely to remain an age of ideological diversity and disagreement. Anyone who hopes to understand this diversity and disagreement will benefit, we believe, from a careful reading of the selections that follow, which provide a generous sampling of some of the writings that have helped to form the ideologically varied political terrain of the small planet on which we dwell together, if not always, alas, in peace and harmony.

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