

Wanted: A New Ideology



David Olney is an Associate of SIA and is Resident Philosopher and Co-host on SIA's podcast – STRATEGIKON

At present it is very difficult to avoid examples and discussion of terms such as ‘truthiness’, ‘post-fact’, and ‘alternative fact’. We appear to have entered an era in which immediate, subjective, and emotional perception has the power to steamroll clear thinking and rational analysis, reducing public debate to ‘us versus them’ polemics. Pronouncements by many of our political leaders are emotive rather than instructive, ephemeral rather than incremental or iterative, and unanchored from shared experience and intersubjective understanding. And then there is President Trump: a distilled product of decades of corrosive and inflammatory processes.

Enough is enough. For at least 2,500 years philosophers have argued that we are, or should at least aspire to be, rational beings. No matter how much effort it takes to carefully think things through, and how much time it takes to develop effective thinking tools, surrendering rational effort in favour of gut instinct, “it feels true,” can only end badly. As David Eagleman has argued in his book, *Incognito*, our unconscious mind will happily get on with running our day without our conscious input, and our limbic system will immediately colour our experience with primal emotions, if we do not choose to think our way to deeper awareness and understanding. While the problems we are facing are becoming larger and more dangerous, our collective unwillingness to do more than legitimise unconscious responses is leading to progressively worse circumstances.

How did we get here? There is, of course, no simple answer, but one can identify and outline a few key factors. By the time that Francis Fukuyama's book, *The End of History and the Last Man*, was published in 1992 the West was already convinced that liberal-capitalist ideology was superior and had underpinned victory in the Cold War. A nice perception to justify the immense costs and awful actions undertaken to defeat the Soviet Union, but entirely disconnected from the internal contradictions that caused the Soviet Union to collapse. The gap between communist rhetoric and reality was so great that utopian communist ideology lost its persuasiveness for people living in a declining dystopia.

After the collapse of communist Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union we were supposedly left with Fukuyama's 'Last Man' and his liberal capitalist ideology. The problem was that the Last Man did not remember that he had responsibilities to the society and system that had scaffolded his success and egotistical swagger. With the decline of communism came an over-inflation of the myopic Western ego, along with a wilful forgetting as to how the West had been made, and how it would need to be remade in order to flourish during changing circumstances.

While a small number of us were contemplating Fukuyama's idea of "Eating Pineapples on the Moon" during the early 1990s, most of the Western world got on with accumulating wealth without questioning how the gravy train was powered and where it was going. Meanwhile, a sizable proportion of humanity took advantage of the reduction in ideological pressure at the end of the Cold War to reassert their cultural identities. Instead of fighting over which utopian ideology to promote, people sought to manifest their particular historical conception of identity—frequently through violence. The New World Order rapidly fell into disorder, the United States was bloodied in Somalia, and Europe experienced the failure of its new, gentle ideology to blunt the edge of centuries old enmities in the Balkans. Grand ideological plans for the distant future were thrown over by gut instincts concerning what is right, who is one of us, and who has to die.

By the middle of the 1990s we had supposedly entered a post ideological age. This, of course, is a ridiculous assertion. Since there was no longer a palpable tension between liberal capitalist and communist ideology, there were no longer immediate motivations to consider one's ideological position in contrast to a clear and persuasive competitor (Cuban Communism was not persuasive, and Chinese Communism is primarily concerned with legitimising authoritarianism). While the West bickered amongst itself during the late 1990s, over whether to be neo-liberal, neo-conservative, or 'third way', much of the rest of the world got on with instrumentalising culture into narrowly defined political forms. By the end of the 1990s radical Islamism and Putin's brand of authoritarianism were ready to burst onto the scene. While Enlightenment and Cold War era ideologies were broadly characterised by inclusivity and a future orientation, radical Islamism and Putin's authoritarianism depend on exclusive definitions of the in-group, historical grievances to be redressed, and

historical golden ages to light the way. Universal and progressive ideology has been replaced by emotionally immature nationalism and cultural reductionism. Universal ideologies might have been grounded in too much idealism, but what we are experiencing now is grounded in too much enmity and wilful ignorance.

We desperately need a new inclusive and progressive ideology: something that can provide a scaffold for rational analysis and comprehensive debate. This is not going to be easy in a world that is characterised by narrowly defined moral positions. As Jonathan Haidt convincingly argues in *The Righteous Mind*, we all think we have the moral high ground, but our conception of what is moral is both narrow and excludes other moral positions. Accordingly, I have to acknowledge that I might be exclusivist and narrow minded, and then try to struggle past it.

Where to begin? The world is struggling at the moment, so struggle seems an apt place to begin. Nietzsche is our ultimate guide regarding struggle: he spent most of his life struggling to be the person he wanted to be and trying to capture why we should struggle and what we should try to become. Nietzsche's *The Will to Power* is a challenge to self: a call to struggle to make oneself a better person. Nietzsche rejected nationalism, militarism, and early forms of fascism during his life, and the first lesson that can be taken from his experience and writing is that you have to stop being petty and narrow before you can reason and will yourself into becoming something else. A new ideology will have to grasp the value of struggle: that the means by which we try to function and progress are at least as important as the ends we espouse to justify our choices.

One way to overcome our narrowly defined moral ends is to engage with Albert Camus's writing on the absurd. Camus's position is that if we look at the world openly, without imposing our narrow perspective on it, we will see that much of what happens around us is absurd. This is obviously disturbing, but is also liberating, as recognising the immensity of the absurdity is something we can share with anyone open minded enough to acknowledge that the world is too much to explain. No ideology has ever overcome this intrinsic absurdity, so any new ideology should accept the limits of explanation and definition inherent in an absurd world.

A new ideology needs to help us overcome conspicuous consumption, as resources are finite and every survey on happiness suggests that more stuff is not making us any happier. The Roman Stoics are the masters of overcoming attachment to stuff. They counsel enjoying the things we can own and consume, but not being so attached to them that we will sacrifice our well-being for things that are not central to our wellbeing. The Stoics also counsel that we should prepare for what can go wrong, the 'premeditation of evil', so that when bad things happen we have already practiced how we are going to respond. Under current economic circumstances, being less attached to stuff and better prepared to deal with what we perceive could go wrong are important characteristics for a new ideology.

Whether we employ Aristotle's Golden Mean from his *Ethics*, or the Chinese concept of Wu-Wei as elaborated by Edward Slingerland, the aim of any new ideology has to be to help us flourish. Flourishing, as conceived in ancient Greece and China, did not mean being happy, but instead meant living well. Happiness might be a consequence of flourishing, but learning to live well can take a very long time and there is no guarantee of happiness. Accordingly, a new ideology should be careful to offer something more than a promise of present or future happiness.

Developing such a new ideology could take years, while our current debacle will continue at a pace. Whether someone will take up the challenge to develop a new ideology, or not, I do not know, but I am sure that we can make better choices today. If we reflect on the virtuous ideas and salient warnings that thoughtful minds have provided us throughout history, then we will have enough to challenge the entropy and decay of our era. Unless we challenge emotive rhetoric and narrowly defined morality with progressive and inclusive ideas, which might underpin a new ideology, we are going to fail ourselves, as well as all of the thinkers who cared about all of us flourishing.

**Views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of
SAGE International Australia**

Image Credits

Drflet, Wikimedia Commons

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rodin%27s_The_Thinker.jpg