

‘The ideological tree is always green’: Norberto Bobbio and the Future of Ideology Studies

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As the essays in this collection have demonstrated, Norberto Bobbio was not just an important agent in the intellectual politics of the post-war world; he was also an innovative theorist who left behind a rich body of intellectual resources for students of ideologies. He helped us to think about the role that ideas play in political systems; he did important work to historicise modern conceptions of rights; and he exposed the political meanings of abstract philosophical ideas. In what follows, I will attempt to sketch some of Bobbio’s principal achievements and situate him within the discipline of ideology studies. In doing so, I hope to show that Bobbio’s ideas can help us to think through the difficult problems that we encounter when we attempt to make sense of ideologies and their histories.

We might begin this endeavour by noting that when Bobbio wrote his major works in the post-war period, the notion that we could study ideologies as distinctive entities remained alien. This was, in part, because the concept of ideology tended to be defined in negative terms. It was common, that is, for contemporaries to regard ideology as an eliminable feature of political systems that obscured the truth of the social world. On occasion, Bobbio referred to ideologies in these terms. When, for instance, he employed Popperite empiricism to challenge what he called the ‘Italian ideology’, he threatened to create space for a non-ideological mode of political thinking.¹ But in important ways, he also moved beyond the reductive conception of ideology that had taken root in the nineteenth-century. To uphold the negative definition of ideology, we must assume that there are ways of thinking that do not involve the construction of subjective values and beliefs. Bobbio, despite going to great lengths to distinguish between descriptive and prescriptive uses of concepts, rejected this notion. As Pazé and Cuono’s essay demonstrates, he accepted that there was no way of communicating a concept without it acquiring some kind of subjective value, and this notion informed the way he engaged with debates about freedom, democracy, rights and other key political concepts.

Bobbio also dismissed the claim that ideology could be vanquished from the social world. In response to the so-called ‘end of ideology’ thesis, which had

¹ Perry Anderson, ‘The Affinities of Norberto Bobbio’, *New Left Review*, July 1988.

positioned liberal democracy as the antithesis to ‘ideological’ politics, he claimed that there was nothing more ideological than claiming that ideology did not exist. He did so, in part, because he believed that ideology was perennial rather than contingent. As he put it in *Left and Right*, ‘the ideological tree is always green’.² Marxism, fascism and other ‘dogmatic’ ideologies had not exhausted the ideological struggle. Rather, they were merely staging posts in an unending battle for ideas. That is not to say that Bobbio was willing to collapse all political activity into the realm of ideology. He sought to create space for interests and other phenomena that he believed could not be collapsed into the realm of ideas, and he resisted the excesses of post-structuralism. But his consideration of interests was informed by the way that rationality was mediated by ideas.

It is perhaps appropriate, then, to situate Bobbio alongside Antonio Gramsci in the story of our discipline’s origins.³ He did not attract the attention of the Anglophone left in the same way as Gramsci.⁴ Nonetheless, his own critique of orthodox Marxism played a similarly important role in negating the reductive base-superstructure formulation that had obscured the causal significance of ideas. But if we rightly place Bobbio in the story of ideology studies’ development, we should not assume that he was simply an intermediary between old and new. It might be tempting to place Bobbio and others in a straightforward story about the emergence of ideology from the shadow of Marxist orthodoxy and the subsequent exhaustion of positivist political theory following the ‘linguistic’ turn of the 1970s. Yet doing so would conceal the contingency and complexity of Bobbio’s intellectual journey. The essays collected in this special issue have shown that Bobbio did not follow a linear trajectory. He made numerous about-turns over the course of his life, and he revised his theoretical ideas in relation to the changing context that he observed. He can thus show us the intellectual flux of the post-war moment and the different courses that were charted out of the Cold War conjuncture.

It is also the case that we can rescue and revise some of the lesser-known insights in Bobbio’s body of work to sharpen our methodologies and pose new theoretical questions. This work will undoubtedly be aided by the ongoing translation of his writings. But as the essays collected here reveal, we are already in a position to employ Bobbio as a point of reference as we try to carry the discipline of ideology studies forward.

² Norberto Bobbio, *Left and Right: The Significance of a Political Distinction* (London: Polity, 1996), p. 3.

³ Michael Freedon, *Ideology: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 19-25.

⁴ Geoff Eley, ‘Reading Gramsci in English: Observations on the Reception of Antonio Gramsci in the English-speaking world, 1952-82’, *European History Quarterly*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (1984), pp. 441-478.

Left, Right and Centre

One of Bobbio's achievements was to re-assert and reimagine the spatial conception of politics at a moment when some scholars and commentators were anticipating its extinction. In response to the likes of Francis Fukuyama and Anthony Giddens, who were claiming that the left-right distinction was being rendered redundant by the conditions of post-modernity, Bobbio stated its analytical importance.⁵ Not only did he establish the perennial relevance of distributive questions to political contestation; he also showed how the conditions of the late twentieth-century could be understood in relation to them. But while much of *Left and Right* was preoccupied with exploring the polarity of left and right, there is another dimension to this text that has been largely ignored.⁶ This dimension is deftly reconstructed in Drochon's essay, which discusses Bobbio's conception of the political centre. In Bobbio's mind, the centre was not merely an indeterminate space between left and right; it was a place where particular kinds of political thought took place. It was the home of synthetic concepts and formulations that were necessarily paradoxical; and it was a space that expanded and contracted according to the ebbs and flow of the left and right. Whether we are sympathetic to this reading of the political centre will depend upon our own methodological preferences and our own reading of history. But it does, at very least, provide us with a point of reference that we can employ when we contemplate the different ideological formations that try to occupy the political centre ground.

How might we carry Bobbio's categories forward to theorise the political centre? One answer to this question is offered by Drochon. We might, he argues, conceive of the centre-extreme distinction as a useful way of conceptualising political change. This notion has significant implications that Bobbio did not entirely ignore. Indeed Bobbio identified a moderate-extreme polarity that could inform political competition. But because he believed that this distinction

⁵ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992); Anthony Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right: The Future of Radical Politics* (London: Polity, 1994). For Bobbio's views on Fukuyama, see Norberto Bobbio, 'At the Beginning of History', *New Left Review*, September 1998.

⁶ We do not have to accept Soper's claim that Bobbio denied 'real existence' to 'third way' political movements. Kate Soper, 'Conserving the Left: Reflections on Norberto Bobbio, Anthony Giddens and the Left-Right Distinction', *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory*, No., 84 (1999), p. 68.

followed from debates about means rather than ends, he claimed that it did not pose a significant threat to the primacy of the left-right formulation.⁷ To some extent this is true. After all, it is disagreements about objectives that tend to motivate a good deal of political conflict. But the means-ends distinction can also conceal as much as it reveals. This becomes especially apparent when we draw attention to those ideologies that seem to be more concerned with the former rather than the latter. Consider conservatism. As Freedon and others have argued, conservatives are often reluctant to specify ends that they wish to realise. Instead, they are preoccupied with managing change, and they tend to assess the value of a particular arrangement in relation to that criterion rather than, say, equality.⁸ Conservatives may, of course, have views about distributive questions, but they tend to be contingent features of their ideological architecture. That is one reason why some conservatives have, in recent years, tried to claim the egalitarian mantle for themselves.⁹ Locating conservatism on Bobbio's left-right spectrum is thus remarkably difficult.

Because it has a temporal dimension, the centre-extreme distinction can help us to think about the way political ideologies contest change. It can help us to think, for instance, about how political concepts come to acquire historical meanings. Why is it that 'technocratic' politics is often associated with moderation and gradualism? And why do particular policies, such as nationalisation, come to be associated with the 'pastness' of particular historical moments?¹⁰ To answer these kinds of questions, we need to think more deeply about the relationship between the left-right distinction and the other distinctions that we might identify within political systems. At some junctures, Bobbio threatened to conflate the extreme-moderate dyad into the left-right one. In other words, he assumed that an individual on the moderate left will want less equality than an individual on the radical left.¹¹ Yet the moderate-extreme distinction, as Bobbio himself acknowledged, concerns a rather different criterion, namely the desirability of change.¹² In a socialist society, even the fervent advocate of

⁷ Bobbio, *Left and Right*, p. 20. Elsewhere, Bobbio wrote that '[m]an is a teleological animal, who generally acts with a view to an end projected into the future'. Norberto Bobbio, *The Age of Rights* (London: Polity, 1996), p. 34.

⁸ Michael Freedon, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), p. 335, p. 409.

⁹ Phillip Blond, *Red Tory: How Left and Right Have Broken Britain and How We Can Fix It* (London: Faber & Faber, 2010).

¹⁰ Richard Jobson, "'Waving the Banners of a Bygone Age": Nostalgia and Labour's Clause IV controversy, 1959-60', *Contemporary British History*, Vol. 27 (2013), pp. 123-144.

¹¹ Bobbio, *Left and Right*, p. 6.

¹² Bobbio, *Left and Right*, p. 20.

equality will be a moderate, while a conservative may be pushed to the extremes in their efforts to restore a lost social order. To acknowledge this is to recognise that categories like left and right gain different meanings in relation to a status quo that is necessarily contested. The status quo is not an objective fact; it is an ideological construction that the left and right define themselves in relation to.

Drochon's essay does not attempt to displace the left-right dyad. Rather, it shows how the left and the right can seek to define the political centre in moments of flux. Nonetheless, it might be an opportune moment to ask whether the left-right dyad will be able to cope with the kinds of ideological transformations that have gathered momentum in recent years. On the one hand, we might be inclined to see some trends as marking a displacement of the left-right formulation. Think, for instance, of the way in which so-called 'cultural' questions have come to inform electoral behaviour in some modern democracies.¹³ If this trend is understood as a symptom of post-distributive political thinking, then we might have reason to believe that the left-right dyad will lose at least some of its explanatory force. Yet it is entirely plausible to rehearse Bobbio's argument that 'new' political forms can always be accommodated by the left and the right. Many of the 'cultural' questions that seem to be climbing the political agenda have distributive elements that are concealed by a preoccupation with economics. Indeed if we think about inequality in terms of the distribution of cultural, as opposed to economic, capital, we might arrive at a very different reading of recent developments.¹⁴ It may also be the case that some trends will marginalise the 'centre-extreme' distinction and allow the left-right dyad to reassert its primacy. Consider, for instance, the trajectory of 'green' politics. It was once common for ecological movements to be described as 'single issue' campaigns, a rhetorical move that cast them off from the cut-and-thrust of 'normal' or 'orthodox' politics.¹⁵ But in recent years, as climate change has loomed increasingly large on our time horizons, this distinction has become difficult to uphold. There is a sense that it is no longer possible to drive a wedge between distributive questions and ecological concerns when the latter are so closely tied to arguments about the way we produce and distribute goods and wealth.¹⁶

A critic of Bobbio's formulation may suggest that while the left-right distinction persists, we cannot assume that this reflects an essential truth about

¹³ Jonathan Wheatley, *The Changing Shape of Politics: Rethinking Right and Left in a New Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2019).

¹⁴ Mike Savage, *Social Class in the 21st Century* (London: Penguin, 2015).

¹⁵ Raymond Williams, 'The Red and Green', *London Review of Books*, 3 February 1983.

¹⁶ Jason Hickel, *Less is More: How Degrowth Will Save The World* (London: Windmill, 2021).

the nature of political competition. Left and right, they might argue, are floating signifiers that can mean anything to anyone.¹⁷ This kind of argument certainly encourages us to be more attentive than Bobbio was to the way that spatial concepts are employed as constitutive rhetorical tools as well as analytical categories. But they do not necessarily do harm to the Bobbio's central claim, namely that the left-right distinction was not merely a pertinent metaphor but a reflection of the general nature of political competition. If politics is about the distribution of power and resources, it is difficult to escape the competing claims of the left and right, even if the language that we use to describe those claims changes over time.

This insight followed from Bobbio's response to a perennial methodological problem. This problem can be expressed in the form of a question: how do we use concepts as analytical categories if their meanings are necessarily indeterminate? Whenever we try to employ concepts as starting-points for the study for ideas, we confront their plurality and contestability. Put simply, the 'left' will not possess the same meaning in Britain as it will in, say, the United States. Bobbio's solution to this problem guarded against both reductive essentialism and the excesses of post-structuralist scepticism. By inferring the 'descriptive meanings of the terms from normal political practice', he would identify within them those meanings that were ineliminable and would use them to stabilise the concept as a tool of analysis. In the case of the left-right dyad, this meant privileging what they have to say about distributive justice. In Bobbio's view, whenever we refer to 'left' and 'right' in relation to politics, we are describing attitudes to distributive justice. That is not to say that left and right cannot possess additional meanings that have little to do with equality. But as concepts, they would always, in Bobbio's calculation, say something about the distribution of scarce resources. This approach, whereby concepts are elevated to analytical status through the identification of their ineliminable meanings, is one that now informs a good deal of work in both the field of conceptual history and ideology studies.¹⁸ It also provides a useful bridge between approaches that are preoccupied with rhetoric and language and those that have emerged from social science.

¹⁷ Jonathan White, 'Community, transnationalism and the left-right metaphor', *European Journal of Social Theory*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2021), pp. 197-219.

¹⁸ Some of Bobbio's later writings make reference to the conceptual history practiced by Reinhardt Koselleck. See Bobbio, *The Age of Rights*, p. 70.

Liberalism and Socialism in Turbulent Times

Bobbio made important contributions to Europe's tradition of left-liberal thought. For half a century, he provided inspiration and intellectual resources to those intellectuals, politicians and activists who were trying to reconcile liberal democratic means with socialistic ends. The moral and philosophical foundations of these resources are carefully reconstructed by Ragazzoni and Sciara's respective essays. In different ways, these essays explore Bobbio's attempt to reconcile the concepts of equality and freedom, and when they are taken together, they raise broader questions about the historical relationship between liberalism and socialism. In particular, they invite us to think about the different ways that these traditions interacted with one another in post-war Europe. In the early-1980s, when many socialists in Britain were trying to reach beyond the parliamentary model of democracy to envisage a socialist future, Bobbio was defending it with the same end in view.¹⁹ We might explain these disparities by drawing attention to the different ways in which mid-century fascism registered in the minds of progressives.²⁰ Or, alternatively, we might consider the way that socialists responded differently to the growth of the modern capitalist state. But whatever conclusions we arrive at, they will need to be supported by a more comparative and transnational account of progressive thought in post-war Europe. Although some studies have tried to construct transnational narratives about the European left, little work has been done to trace the dialogues that liberals and socialists had with each other.²¹ These dialogues, as the essays collected here demonstrate, are of vital importance if we are to understand the intellectual and cultural politics of the post-war moment. They show us how intellectuals employed particular political systems as points of reference, and they can help us trace the movement of ideas across space and time.

Contributors to this issue have also offered important insights about Bobbio's attempts to adjudicate between the liberal and socialist traditions. On his part, Ragazzoni has shown how, for Bobbio, procedural democracy could act as a bridge between different aspects of their conceptual repertoires. On the one

¹⁹ Ralph Miliband, *Capitalist Democracy in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982). Norberto Bobbio, *The Future of Democracy* (London: Polity, 1987).

²⁰ Marcia Landy, 'Socialism and/or Democracy: Gramsci and/or Bobbio', *Boundary 2*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (1990), pp. 186-7.

²¹ Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

hand, liberals could extend their conception of democratic freedom by embracing the notion of social rights. On the other, socialists could extend their conception of equality by regarding democracy as the precondition for socialism. With similar implications, Sciara has drawn attention to the way that Bobbio developed a particular critique of Croce's work in his attempt to reconcile a philosophy of freedom with the egalitarian ideals of the socialist tradition. Once freedom was defined in relation to the state rather than individual morality, it became possible to reconcile freedoms with the egalitarianism that Croce was so critical of. In many ways, then, Bobbio was seeking to resolve what Marquand once called the 'progressive dilemma'. That is, the tendency for socialists and liberals to part company and allow the right to dictate the rules of the political game.²²

As well as illuminating the conceptual and philosophical foundations of Bobbio's liberal socialism, contributors have also drawn attention to aspects of his thought that have received relatively little attention. Craiutu and Griffo, in their contribution, show the significance of what we might call the 'qualities of mind and character' within the liberal tradition of thought.²³ Tracing Bobbio and Raymond Aron's respective journeys through the polarised cultural politics of the Cold War, they show how both thinkers shared some common ideas about the role of human character in the political sphere. Both were suspicious of 'emotional' reasoning, and they expressed a preference for qualities like patience and modesty.²⁴ These preferences followed from their epistemological beliefs, and they can be employed as starting-points for a broader examination of post-war intellectual politics. More work can be done on this aspect of Bobbio's thought. Does it tell us something about Bobbio's own reading of post-modernity? Can it be interpreted as a negotiation with post-Rawlsian scepticism about analytical philosophy? Were particular virtues, such as moderation or meekness, the ideological adhesives that could bind liberalism and socialism together? Or did the discussion or virtues become less important in binding progressives together in concrete political and ideological movements?

The above questions have considerable contemporary relevance, for we are, in some ways at least, witnessing a crisis of liberalism that is dividing progressive politics.²⁵ If they wish to heal their divides, progressives may need to

²² David Marquand, *The Progressive Dilemma: From Lloyd George to Blair* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999).

²³ Jeremy Nutthall, 'The Persistence of Character in Twentieth-Century British Politics', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (2020), pp. 96-116.

²⁴ Norberto Bobbio, *In Praise of Meekness: Essays on Ethics and Politics* (London: Polity, 2000), pp. 19-39.

²⁵ Katrina Forrester, 'The crisis of liberalism: why centrist politics can no longer explain the world', *The Guardian*, 18 November 2019.

retrace the steps of their respective ideological traditions and discover the ideas and concepts that can help them to narrate and shape the political conjuncture that we now inhabit. Re-reading Bobbio's works can only aid this reckoning with the liberal past. Such work may also help progressive philosophers and intellectuals to re-engage with the realm of virtues and the allow them to acquire a more substantive place in the ideological architecture of the left.

Bobbio and the history of Post-war Europe

My final concern is the historical context that Bobbio inhabited. Many of the essays in this collection have shed light on the social and political changes that Bobbio navigated over the course his life, and they help to illuminate what his life can tell us about the intellectual history of post-war Europe. One theme has already been alluded to, namely the transnational intellectual climate to which Bobbio contributed. When he was constructing both his version of liberal socialism and his distinctive approach to political theory, Bobbio searched far and wide for ideas and concepts. He imported Popper's epistemology into Italy's political vocabulary; he re-read Constant; and, when he came to assess the nature of political competition in the late twentieth-century, he engaged with Perry Anderson and other writers on the British New Left. So while we should, of course, locate Bobbio in a story about post-war Italy, we need to find a way of incorporating him into a broader, transnational narrative about the intellectual politics of post-war Europe. What might this story look like?

One way of historicising Bobbio would be to situate him in a straightforward story about Cold War politics. After all, his trajectory seems to be indicative of broader movements of opinion that followed from the cultural politics of that cultural and political moment. Such a procedure would not be without merit. Bobbio was a certain kind of Cold War liberal whose ideas belonged to the peculiar historical conditions of the post-war world.²⁶ But we should be wary of collapsing him into a simple story about the trajectory of Cold War politics. There was no linear history of post-war liberalism. Key thinkers were making false starts, engaging with new ideas and revising their thoughts, and we need to acknowledge the contingent nature of their respective journeys. Jan Werner-Muller has claimed that post-war Italy was 'a kind of microcosm of

²⁶ Nadia Urbinati, 'Liberalism in the Cold War: Norberto Bobbio and the dialogue with the PCI', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (2003), pp. 578-603.

the various possibilities, missed opportunities and limits in ... ‘the age of ideologies’.²⁷ Revisiting Bobbio’s writings can help us to trace those possibilities and opportunities. We can see in his writings ideas and concepts that were left undeveloped or which gained different meanings as Bobbio carried them forward into new contexts. In this collection Scarcia has drawn particular attention to Bobbio’s abandonment of personalism and the influence that Popper had upon his approach to philosophy. But there are other ruptures and moments of opportunity that other contributors have also pointed towards. In his later life, Bobbio returned to virtue ethics when he identified ‘meekness’ as an apolitical trait that could serve democratic ends, and to some extent Bobbio’s, this turn to virtues reflected a broader conjuncture in the history of modern philosophy. Rawls might have helped to marginalise utilitarianism in the 1970s and 1980s. Yet it was possible to see in his schema another version of philosophy that was obscuring the ethical life of real individuals in the name of abstract rules.²⁸

Not only can we use Bobbio at a point of reference in our histories of post-war Europe, but we can also reconstruct the story that he told about the modern world and, in particular, the progressive traditions of thought that he belonged to. Jan Werner-Muller and Katrina Forrester have, in different ways, shown how John Rawls and other key thinkers historicised liberalism as they reimagined the liberal project.²⁹ Bobbio should be the subject of the same kind of approach. As Yturbe noted two decades ago, Bobbio looked to history to provide him with answers to the problems that he encountered.³⁰ This, as Sciara notes, entailed a particular approach to understanding the past that owed a debt to Popper’s empiricism but which tied to reconcile it with a philosophy of history.³¹ Bobbio, like Popper, was suspicious of historicism and told a story about liberalism that stressed its place in a contingent history of struggle. It is a story that appears with particular clarity in *The Age of Rights*, in which Bobbio told a story about the emergence and evolution of liberal rights. Here, Bobbio described the attainment of rights as the product of the social conflict that was generated by technological change. ‘Rights,’ he wrote, ‘are not fundamental by their nature. That which appears to be fundamental in a given historical era or civilization, is not

²⁷ Jan Werner-Muller, ‘The Paradoxes of Post-War Italian Political Thought’, *History of European Ideas*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (2013), p. 83.

²⁸ Katrina Forrester, *In The Shadow of Justice: Postwar Liberalism and the Remaking of Political Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), pp. 242-243.

²⁹ Jan Werner-Muller, ‘Rawls, Historian: Remarks on Political Liberalism’s “Historicism”’, *Revue de Internationale Philosophie*, Vol. 60, No. 237 (2006), pp. 327-339. Forrester, *In The Shadow of Justice*, p. 267.

³⁰ Corina Yturbe, ‘On Norberto Bobbio’s Theory of Democracy’, *Political Theory*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (1997), p. 391.

³¹ Bobbio, *The Age of Rights*, p. 33.

fundamental in other era or civilizations.’³² The modern ‘age of rights’, it was claimed, had emerged out of the peculiar antagonisms that marked the French Revolution, and to understand the future of rights, it was necessary to acknowledge the dynamics of power that were being structure by technological innovation. Somewhat prophetically, he As we enter a moment when rights-based ideologies seem to be entering a crucial phase of development, this way of thinking about rights may be of considerable use.

Conclusion

At one and the same time, Norberto Bobbio helps us to retrace the steps of our discipline and imagine its future. We can look back over our shoulders to see his journey through the twentieth-century, and when we do so, we can trace many of the developments that have shaped the study of ideologies. But in a sense, Bobbio also looks over us as we orientate ourselves towards future. His methodological pluralism and celebration of tolerance can help us to reconcile some of the different starting-points that scholars employ to study ideas. And the large body of intellectuals resources that h bequeathed to us continues to inspire new approaches and arguments. Whether we want to historicise liberalism, comment on the spatial categorisation of politics or consider the role of character and virtue in political thinking, Bobbio will continue to provide us with both questions and answers for many years to come. He will also remind us of the responsibilities that we have to the communities of knowledge that political theory serves.³³

³² Bobbio, *The Age of Rights*, p. 6.

³³ Cited in Richard Bellamy, *Modern Italian Social Theory* (London: Polity, 1988), p. 142.