
Ideology in the Era of Modernization and Globalization

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Introduction

In his book *The Lexus and Olive Tree*, Thomas Friedman distinguishes globalization as one of the most defining characters for comprehending post-Cold War world affairs. According to Friedman, globalization is “the system that has now replaced the old Cold War system, and, like that Cold War system, globalization has its own rules and logic that today directly or indirectly influence the politics, environment, geopolitics and economics of virtually every country in the world.”^① Upon this backdrop, this essay intends to analyze how ideology is understood in this modernized and globalized world and whether traditional orthodoxies of ideologies have faded or changed over time. For this purpose, I will examine ideology in the sense of its structural value (as a political, economic, and social system) as well as its presumed understanding as an intrinsic (abstract) value.

Ideology in the Modernized and Globalized World

During the Cold War (1947–1991), the world was divided into two ideological spheres: liberal political, economic, and social systems versus socialist political, economic, and social systems. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the resultant end of the Cold War enabled liberal and capitalist ideological agendas to dominate state affairs in the following decades. Some triumphalist Western observers optimistically predicted that non-liberal capitalist societies would eventually follow and form Western-style political, economic, and social systems. This sentiment was aptly represented by Francis Fukuyama’s celebrated article, “The End of History?”, in which he wrote,

What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.^②

According to Kishore Mahbubhani, particularly regarding China, the assumption held by many key Western foreign policy elites and scholars was that “continued engagement of China by America would lead to American values seeping into China and that China would gradually open up its political system

① Thomas L. Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999).

② Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?” *The National Interest* 16 (1989): 1.

and join the Western liberal mainstream.”^① The effects of hyper-globalization and modernization have been largely seen as drivers that fuel and accelerate such transformations. It is true that some non-Western societies have embraced social and political systems influenced by Western ideologies. However, some others have been able to successfully merge different ideological traditions together in forming their state structures to better equip their societies in coping with the unfamiliar tides of modernization and globalization. China and Vietnam are classic examples of the aforementioned countries. In both countries, socialist political systems co-exist with capitalist market-oriented economies. One could argue that both countries have delivered greater social and political stability and achieved greater economic prosperity^② than many other comparative societies in the world today.^③

In his infamous article, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” George F. Kennon refers to the Russian population during Cold War as “physically and spiritually tired.”^④ In the same article, Kennon emphasizes that spiritual vitality is an integral part of society, as it helps said society to successfully cope with its internal problems. However, what does exactly Kennon mean by the spiritual vitality of society is seemingly a matter of debate. Hegelian philosophical discourse on collective consciousness may offer some insight in this regard. For example, Francis Fukuyama maintained the view that “For Hegel, the contradictions that drive history exist first of all in the realm of human consciousness.”^⑤ This so-called human consciousness primarily reflects on the level of ideas that are largely considered to be unifying world views that could best be understood under the notion of ideology.^⑥ Hegel further views that ideology in this sense is not confined to the secular, such as political doctrines, but can also be included with values significant to the religion and culture of a given society.^⑦ Therefore, even though the concept of ideology in world affairs is often considered in the sense of political and economic systems, as discussed in the paragraph above, it can also be comprehended in its intrinsic ethical value as well.

According to Hegelian conception, the spirit or the collective consciousness of a given society emanates from its historical experience. Therefore, collective consciousness decides and provides the basis for the explanations on historical evolvement and development of a given era. Thus, notions such as nationalism and ideology are all of part of this collective consciousness underpinned by a so-called historical experience.

① Kishore Mahbubani, *Has China Won?: The Chinese Challenge to the American Primacy* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2020): 110.

② “Globalization brings shifts in Vietnam,” *China Daily*, January 19, 2017, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2017wef/2017-01/19/content_27998575.htm (accessed June 1, 2022).

③ “The Winners and Losers of Globalization: Finding a Path to Shared Prosperity,” *The World Bank*, October 25, 2013, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2013/10/25/The-Winners-and-Losers-of-Globalization-Finding-a-Path-to-Shared-Prosperity> (accessed June 1, 2022).

④ “X” (George F. Kennan), “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” *Foreign Affairs*, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/1947-07-01/sources-soviet-conduct> (accessed June 1, 2022).

⑤ Fukuyama, “The End of History?,” 3.

⑥ Ibid.

⑦ Ibid.

This explains why Deng Xiaoping, in referring to China's party ideology after Chairman Mao Zedong's death, claimed:

Some had distorted Mao's ideas by taking certain statements made in one context and claiming that they applied to other situations. But Mao had different solutions at different times, and one must have a correct and comprehensive understanding of Mao to apply his prescriptions correctly in each circumstance.^①

This understanding was evident when the official ideology of the Chinese Communist Party shifted from the "Two Whatevers"^② to "practice is the sole criterion for testing truth." This change demonstrated a clear divergence from Mao's ideology as the "Two Whatevers" were seen as an impediment to China's goals of globalization and modernization. Hu Fuming's commentary "Practice Is the Sole Criterion for Testing Truth" (1978) argues that "we must dare to investigate life in its actuality, real data, and new problems confronted in the course of recent practice. This is the only correct attitude towards Marxism."^③ Thus, fundamental argument this commentary aims to deliver was that Marxism must constantly be reinterpreted as a result of experience, and it should not be regarded as a rigid or an unchanging body of thinking.^④

Furthermore, Hegel believed that "[human] consciousness may not be explicit and self-aware, as are modern political doctrines, but may rather take the form of religion or simple cultural or moral habits."^⑤ In this regard, ideology can be understood as an abstract concept that provides guidance for the utility in the material world. In the case of China, many observers speculate that its socialist ideology may have changed after the reform and opening process. Regardless, China's political elite often define the country's ideology (or at least its guiding principle) as "socialism with Chinese characteristics."^⑥ However, due to its abstract nature, it is difficult to clarify in concrete terms what exactly "socialism with Chinese characteristics" means. For this reason, different interpretations have emerged in scholarly debates. Some scholars believe that the concept of "practice is the sole criterion for testing truth" provides theoretical guidance on Chinese socialist ideology. It is obvious that this concept is essentially different to conventional or traditional socialist ideological values. Therefore, in China, the conventional fundamental values of ideology (e.g., class struggle, the "Two Whatevers," etc.) have been subject to reinterpretation and in their current form they appear to be rather ambiguous. Consequently, these values have been contested with diverse interpretations in discourses in different domains.

① Ezra F. Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011): 171.

② The "Two Whatevers" refers to the statement "We will resolutely uphold whatever policy decisions Chairman Mao made, and unswervingly follow whatever instructions Chairman Mao gave," contained in a joint editorial entitled, "Study the Documents Well and Grasp the Key Link" (Feb. 1977) in the *People's Daily*, the *PLA Daily*, and the journal *Red Flag*.

③ "Practice Is the Sole Criterion of Truth," *Chinese Studies in Philosophy* 25, no.2 (1993): 42.

④ Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, 176.

⑤ Fukuyama, "The End of History?," 3.

⑥ "What does 'path of socialism with Chinese characteristics' mean?," *CGTN*, <https://www.cgtn.com/how-china-works/feature/What-does-path-of-socialism-with-Chinese-characteristics-mean.html> (accessed March 9, 2022).

Conclusion

In “The End of History?”, Fukuyama contemplates whether the world has reached the end of ideological evolution. The straightforward answer is no. Despite the dynamic trends of globalization and modernization, the world is still ideologically diverse. Some societies have been able to successfully adopt and merge different value systems into one coherent system in which different ideological values coexist. In the sense of ideology as an intrinsic value, traditional ideologies have been transformed and reinterpreted in order to make them applicable to the changing circumstances of globalization and modernization. How China changed its official party ideology from the “Two Whatever’s” to “practice is the sole criterion for testing truth” to achieve its development goals serves as a classic example of such transformation and reinterpretation.

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