On Ideocratic Polities and Projects.
Theoretical Considerations

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Abstract

This article approaches the role of ideocratic projects, focusing on cosmocratic and constitutional domination, while looking at the concept of ideocracy in premodern and especially modern contexts. The article also argues for the conceptual usefulness of the term ideocracy in analysing certain regime types, and, especially when considering totalist dimensions, enabling researchers to go beyond traditional left-right or religious-secular divides. Whereas cosmocratic domination represented a fundamental trait in premodern ideocracies, modern ideocratic projects have tended to move to a constitutionalist form of domination. In doing so, ideocracies typically stay true to their doctrinal core, even as they may end up pursuing a hybrid approach.

Keywords: Ideocracy, Ideology, Modernity, Totalism

Introduction

As the intellectual trend of a certain kind of democratic triumphalism began to be put under ever greater strain in the early 21st century, alternative, typically authoritarian currents have also begun to be placed under more scrutiny. This includes ideocracies. For starters, the concept of ideocracy,

despite the rich history of the polities and projects it represents, remains a quite underresearched topic in comparison to its importance, both in debates regarding premodern and modern autocratic regimes, as well as an analytical tool for understanding certain aspects of authoritarian or even totalist polities in the 21st century.[1]

Yet another aspect which must considered in such an undertaking is the impact of modernity and its contribution to the emergence of nomic crises. In turn, such aspects arguably intensified the sense of urgency for those groups actively pursuing the establishment of ideocratic projects and the implementation of their goals within or even projecting their model beyond their host society.

Lastly, for most ideocratic projects, the idea of the community is essential in the context of a doctrinal core which had the ambition of a totalistic reconstruction of their respective societies. It was this that arguably enabled the survival of totalistic ideocracies into the 21st century, representing in some ways a fundamental challenge and counter-narrative to the liberal-democratic project and – more ominously if we are to include the various other strands of hybrid authoritarianism – to the postwar democratic consensus as a whole.

Authority and Ideocracy

The principle of cosmocratic domination was fundamental for many societies of antiquity. By its complex interaction with life, death, purity and truth, divine kingship and universal rule could come to be intimately connected with the lives of the subjects it ruled.[2] For instance, in the cultures influenced by Mesopotamian models, kingship and law were united with the idea of

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[1] Somewhat unsurprisingly, contemporary works which focus on the concept of ideocracy in detail are few and typically focussed in the Anglo-German scholarly spheres.

[2] The institution of kingship itself marked the beginning of urbanization and of politically organized societies which honoured the memory of their dead (Anagnostou-Laoutides, 2017, p. 198).

universal rule and of a cosmic order. For the successive polities that dominated the Iranian plateau, the idea of a cosmic order makes a recurrent appearance in their political systems. This was of considerable importance, for the social order could thus attempt to model itself on the cosmic system, which was, in turn, associated with justice or even spiritual redemption. It was the fusion between an influential Achaemenid model and Alexander's interpretation of authority that would ultimately bring absolute kingship to the West. This model then essentially became a constitutional norm in the Hellenistic world, later on adopted by the Roman Empire, which, in turn, influenced the European monarchies and other Western successor polities. Moreover, the Abrahamic cultural complex would also go on to redefine the way in which individuals would approach and understand authority, contributing to the transformations which ultimately shaped the great ideocratic and totalist experiments of modernity.[3]

Moreover, the classical Abrahamic world took over a key concept from the various polities which preceded it – namely, that of cosmocratic domination. Of course, the idea of the cosmocratic empire – typically understood as a world-monarchy – cannot be tied to circumstances unique to the Fertile Crescent. Rather, even if the model itself could differ in its implementation, the basic principle seems to have been a common theme to countless cultures remaining relevant in various epochs (Fibinger and Kołodziejczykeds, 2012).

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[3] The evolution and interaction between totality, eschatology, and utopia is important to consider in this respect, and worthwhile in approaching (Murariu, 2017). It must be stated here that the word "totalism" should be distinguished from its well-known conceptual cousin, "totalitarianism", with the former essentially representing a specific worldview and thought system, whereas the latter should be considered a temporary phase in the possible development of a totalist ideocracy. Briefly stated, this article sees totalitarianism as an intense, yet transitory phase, typically associated with totalist movements which have evolved from a heterodox stage into a totalist ideocracy. This stage is characterised by the attempt at implementing part or most of the aims found in the movement's doctrinal core. It is worth considering in this respect that Carl J. Friedrich's famous totalitarianism checklist was eventually modified, with the first feature being the presence of "a totalist" ideology, and Friedrich himself differentiating between totalism and totalitarianism. (Friedrich, 1969).

Nevertheless, one of the most important developments to occur within the boundaries of the Abrahamic cultural complex was its very division. Thus, on one hand, one has the Western European branch, where religious arguments and the religious principle itself gradually moved away from the centre of political discourse. On the other, there is the area dominated by Islamic political thought, where religious tenets and the principle of monotheism [*tawhid*] arguably played a far greater social and political role. For both of these, the concept of ideocracy would prove decisive.

If ideocratic polities themselves are identifiable in antiquity, the term "ideocracy"[4] itself was most likely used for the first time in a scientific context in the early 19th century, with its propagator being Heinrich Leo, a conservative German historian. It is interesting – even if ultimately unhistorical – that Leo writes that an ideocracy can be found nowhere as an original condition [*ursprünglicher Zustand*], arguing instead that it is the effect of a case where the forms of legal state of affairs have become hollow to the extent that the rationality behind them has been forgotten (Leo, 1833, pp. 12-13). Nevertheless, Leo argues that ideocracies themselves have a long history, for instance already identifiable in the Jewish kingdoms and in the state of Lycurgus (Leo, 1833, p. 13). Moreover, he points out that there have been "countless" ideocracies since the era of Savonarola's Florence and of the Anabaptist Revolt in Münster, up until Robespierre's state and the St. Simonian ideocratic project built on the idea of Progress (Leo, 1833, pp. 14-15). Leo was not alone in using of the concept of ideocracy during the 19th century. Indeed, already before 1848, the term was used by an increasing number of authors in Germany (Backes, 2014, pp. 22-28). By the 20th century, the term starts to be encountered with some consistency beyond the German space in the writings of the so-called Russian Eurasianists, who appear to have developed the concept independently (Backes, 2014, pp. 30-35).

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[4] The work edited by Backes and Kailitz provides a relatively recent and detailed overview of the use of the term ideocracy in the 19th and 20th centuries (Backse and Kailitz, 2014).

Lastly, the term ideocracy must also be considered important with respect to theories of totalitarianism. Particularly in their early stages of development, such theories had been decisively influenced by religious analogies – altogether understandable given the background of the thinkers which engaged with this approach. For instance, the very term totalitarian was most likely invented by Luigi Sturzo, an Italian priest and sociologist (Kapferer, 1998, p. 1927). Yet another important scholar who made use of the term ideocracy was Nikolai Berdyaev, a Christian philosopher who made consistent use of religious imagery and analogies in order to describe the Communist ideocratic project (Berdyaev, 1953). The concept proposed by the Russian Eurasianists would also make itself felt in the years following the war with the establishment of Soviet hegemony in Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, the Eurasianist contribution to the totalitarianism debate would not bring about the popularisation of the term "ideocracy", even though it influenced important scholars such as Waldemar Gurian. Thus, Gurian (1964, p. 123) saw totalitarian movements as "secularized politico-social religions", despite their hidden, "basic hostility to religion". He made a direct reference to the Eurasianists, and considered the term "ideocracy" to be a good terminological alternative to the use of religious terms in describing totalitarianism:

Of course, we may use the term ideocracy, introduced by the Russian Eurasian school, in order to satisfy those who are reluctant to connect the venerable name of religion with the totalitarian movements […] The ideocracy would then mean what has been described as secularized socio-political religion. The ideocratic or pseudo-religious character of totalitarianism must obviously result in conflicts with traditional religious groups. These groups are challenged because their claims limit the complex domination of society by the totalitarian movement (Gurian, 1964, pp. 123-124).

After its peak immediately after the war, the concept of ideocracy remained mostly on the sidelines throughout most of the Cold War, with totalitarianism and political religion being consistently more popular, although there were some exceptions to this. For instance, writing after the collapse of the Soviet system in Eastern Europe, Ernest Gellner used the term ideocracy to define

Marxism, namely, "a puritan political system dedicated to a certain vision and dedicated to implementing it, and practising that implementation with conviction and often with great ruthlessness" (Gellner, 1991, p. 1).

Nevertheless, despite the existence of such exceptions, insofar as the Anglo-Saxon cultural area is concerned, the potential of the term was only truly explored in detail during the late 20th century in to the book *Politics of Ideocracy*, written by Jaroslaw Piekalkiewicz and Alfred Wayne Penn. Moreover, the authors link the word ideocracy to Berdyaev's *Russian Idea*, as well as including Sidney and Beatrice Webb, as well as Waldemar Gurian's work on totalitarianism (Piekalkiewicz and Penn, 1995, p. 20). The book often makes use of ideocracy in order to define the features of totalitarianism, defining it as "a political system whose activities are pursued in reference to the tenets of a monistic ideology" (Piekalkiewicz and Penn, 1995, p. 25). Interestingly, in a manner similar to the probable inventor of the term ideocracy, Piekalkiewicz and Penn list a series of premodern and modern polities which they define as ideocracies, ranging from the city-state of Sparta, the Puritan community of Massachusetts, whilst also including the Islamic Republic of Iran, to name a few. Nonetheless, while acknowledging the importance of the authors' research, one should not be so quick to follow their view of ideocracy as basically synonymous with secular religion.

Politics of Ideocracy has remained to this day one of the most detailed treatments of the features of ideocracies, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world. At the same time, the term has come to regain some influence in the German space, with noteworthy contributions being found in the work of Peter Bernholz (2001) and, as already mentioned, more recently in the work edited by Kailitz and Backes. These later works reinforce the arguments of the early and mid-20th century theorists, who could see in ideocracy a useful conceptual tool which can work apart of together with political religion or totalitarianism.

Indeed, the term "ideocracy" and "totalist ideocracy" in particular, can be very useful as an umbrella-term, since it may include both religious and secular regimes, whilst also clearly pointing to the distinctive nature of their authority model, which is based on a totalistic worldview and its implementation.

The process through which a polity may become a totalist ideocracy is a complex one and at times a relatively slow process, typically involving an extensive transformation of a movement, which, upon achieving political hegemony, may then attempt to remake society according to its vision or set of visions arising from its doctrinal core. If one were to take an ideal case scenario for the movement, that is, a case where the totalistic worldview has not fully given way to the required pragmatism of governing to the detriment of its doctrinal core, the polity which results from this process may be called a totalist ideocracy. In other words, the totalist ideocracy can be defined by its readiness to continue or to intensify its ideological program, even in a case where state terror or violence may become prevalent.

In this respect, it arguably offers greater conceptual clarity than the concept of "political religion", even if it can still function alongside it. It must be stated here that although it does show insight in pointing out important apparently religious features, the political religion school has its own analytical limitations (Maier, 2010, pp. 5-16). Thus, whether one is talking of a militant secular endeavour like the Bolshevik Revolution, of theocratic projects like Wahhabism or the Islamic Revolution in Iran, or even hybrid manifestations like the Legion of the Archangel Michael, ideocracy consistently remains a useful conceptual tool. To this, one most also take into account the great transformations which, alongside the project of modernity, enabled ideocratic polities and ideocratic projects to survive or even thrive in the contemporary world.

Although apparently defeated in spirit by the principles of a mostly Anglo-Liberal understanding of democratic tradition, the principles which stand behind the formation and resilience of non-democratic, ideocratic projects have proven, in reality, far stronger than expected. Indeed, rather than being consigned to a state of irrelevance, ideocratic projects – especially in religious variants, but also in secular, ultra-nativist variants – are gaining in strength. This is, in turn, influenced by the multitude of socio-political, economic and cultural crises affecting the Western world and the European Union in particular. To put this into perspective, one may point out that

while the international presence and expansion of constitutional concepts and structures has grown tremendously during the previous decades, this has not been accompanied by an equal process of secularisation. On the contrary, whether by internal revival or demographic change, religion has made its spectacular return to the very centre of Western public discourse.

Of considerable importance here is the term used by Ran Hirschl, namely, "constitutional theocracy". Hirschl describes the constitutional theocracy as an ideal model which possesses the following characteristics:

(1) adherence to some or all core elements of modern constitutionalism, including the formal distinction between political authority and religious authority and the existence of some form of active judicial review; (2) the presence of a single religion or religious denomination that is formally endorsed by the state, akin to a "state religion"; (3) the constitutional enshrining of the religion and its texts, directives, and interpretations as *a* or *the* main source of legislation and judicial interpretation of laws— essentially, laws may not infringe on injunctions of the state- endorsed religion; and (4) a nexus of religious bodies and tribunals that often not only carry tremendous symbolic weight but are also granted official jurisdictional status on either a regional or a substantive basis and operate in lieu of, or in uneasy tandem with, a civil court system (Hirschl, 2010, p. 3).

In Hirschl's view, the prevalence of various kinds of such "constitutional theocracies" in the predominantly Islamic world represents an anomaly from a Western "hegemonic perspective" (Hirschl, 2010, p. 4). Typically, such a perspective focuses on modernity as implying an inevitable and steady form of secularisation, although the resilience of religious influence in this case must still be taken into account, as shown by Löwith (1949) and Blumenberg (1999). Nevertheless, even though Hirschl focuses only on theocracies in his analysis, the process which he identifies can also found in the case of ideocracies driven by secular worldviews. Thus, even as the modern influence of constitutionalism has been spectacularly successful in its spread across the globe, ideocratic projects and polities could find ways to adapt to this process and even to make use of it according to their own perspectives.

Conclusion

The precise degree and nature of the role of modernity in the formation, growth, and, sometimes, expansion of contemporary ideocratic polities should not be understated, even as new, hybrid forms have taken hold with increasing success, in some cases contributing to the reshaping of the current international environment. Indeed, particularly as the previous decade has repeatedly shown, it remains to be seen just how successful the various ideocratic projects will be in the context of a declining liberal-democratic world.

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