

On Utopias and Ideologies: A Reply to Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn

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I HAVE READ Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn's essay "Utopias and Ideologies: Another Chapter in the Conservative Demonology"¹ with sympathy and disquiet. Sympathy because I feel myself fully in accord with the author's strictures on anti-intellectualism among English speaking conservatives, and disquiet because his wide, even promiscuous, use of the terms "utopia" and "ideology" to cover all efforts to serve a political ideal or to think systematically about political matters seems to me misleading and mistaken. "In the history of political thought and sentiment," writes Melvin Lasky, ". . . the price of intellectual probity is ceaseless linguistic awareness." One thing this means is that the political writer who is concerned with the truth of what he writes, and not merely its practical effects, must be prepared to draw distinctions over which the language of common conversation and propaganda alike usually draws a veil. And it signifies something else as well: that any political writer must be prepared to criticize discourse that seems to him to rest upon false or insufficiently refined distinctions, even when the source of that discourse is a distinguished author with whom the range of agreement is wider than the area of dispute.

For as I read "Utopias and Ideologies" I sensed that though I shared the author's preoccupation with the need to built up a powerful intellectual counterforce to Marxism, the dispute between us was a deep one and one that may even touch upon our conceptions of what is political philosophy. I have been too influenced by the writings of Thomas Molnar to like von Kuehnelt-Leddihn's use of "utopia" to characterize all projected political ideals; and too con-

vinced by what Eric Voegelin has written about the nature of ideology to accept the term "ideological" as descriptive of any political position that shows "harmony, coherence, methodical thought, guiding ideas."² It is the logic of this disagreement that I here propose to examine, and in so doing to draw a distinction between ideology, on the one hand, and political philosophy and science, on the other, a distinction that draws deeply on the authors already mentioned as well as upon the works of Leo Strauss, Julien Freund and others.

But first a word of caution. The vocabulary of political and social science is a highly problematic one. The terms we must use are, in many cases, terms that are in daily use and which often have highly emotive connotations. At least three such terms, ideology, utopia and conservatism are germane to the present argument, and I am under no illusion that anything that I say about their proper use or "true" meaning will have any effect on the way they are generally employed. People will continue to use them in a multitude of different senses and in accord with their practical interests of the moment. Even I may, in certain contexts, talk of a "conservative ideology" or an ideology of the Right though I hold the most profound characteristic of such political doctrines to be their anti-ideological character. This is logically scandalous but, I think, inevitable. Since people will continue to call any coherent set of doctrines or propositions about man's political and social life an "ideology," I must, at the level of political action, accept that designation. There is no law, logical or juridical, governing the use of terms in

political action however theoretically inadequate one may find them.

In practical politics the choice is often between what will appear equivocal from the theoretical point of view and what will seem perverse, or at least obscure to those one is trying to sway. At this level I see the force of von Kuehnelt-Leddihn's point that "to condemn ideologies as such is erroneous and even unrealistic. Ideologies...are necessary for our existence and our survival."³ But this is not the level of theory, the level at which, in Eric Voegelin's terms, the theorist carries out a "critical clarification" of the terms used in common sense discourse and practical activity, in order to estimate their truth content or, more precisely, to determine their adequacy to the descriptive analysis of reality.

As Voegelin says: "When a theorist reflects on his own theoretical situation, he finds himself faced with two sets of symbols: the language symbols that are produced as an integral part of the social cosmos in the process of its self-illumination and the language symbols of political science. Both are related with each other insofar as the second set is developed out of the first one through the process that provisionally was called critical clarification. In the course of this process some of the symbols that occur in reality will be dropped because they cannot be put to any use in the economy of science, while new symbols will be developed in theory for the critically adequate description of symbols that are part of reality. . . . When Aristotle wrote his *Ethics* and *Politics*, when he constructed his concepts of the polis, of the constitution, the citizen, the various forms of government, of justice, of happiness, etc., he did not invent these terms and endow them with arbitrary meanings; he took rather the symbols which he found in his social environment, surveyed with care the variety of meanings which they had in common parlance, and ordered and clarified these meanings by the criteria of his theory."⁴

What Voegelin is pointing out is both

the inevitability of our use of symbols that are in daily circulation and their inadequacy for theoretical purposes, that is for achieving a true description of reality, until they have been refined through the process which he calls critical clarification. Political theory in clarifying terms used in political practice brings to light the extent to which they illuminate or obfuscate the true character of the reality to which they are supposed to refer. This is the high demystifying vocation of political philosophy. Political discourse is full of terms which have numerous different and sometimes contradictory meanings as they are used in political life, *vide* the myriad uses of "democratic" and "socialist" in the world today. The political writer cannot ignore these variants without confusing his readers but at the same time, as theorist and for theoretical purposes, he must strive to draw out that meaning which throws most light on that which he is trying to understand. Now, in my view, Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn does not distinguish sufficiently between the level of immediate political practice and that of theory. For this reason, though he is very aware of the different meanings attached to the terms he uses, his own use of "ideology" and "utopia" is not refined enough to be illuminating and the conclusion he reaches, that politics is necessarily ideological and utopian, can only be described as misleading and wrong. Moreover, the fault is grave because by accepting ideology and utopia as elements inseparable from any political doctrine we are deprived of the chance of seeing precisely what is most dangerous in the world transforming creeds that have become so much a part of the modern age.

Let us look at the term "ideology," which seems to me both the most basic and the most problematic of the key terms of von Kuehnelt-Leddihn's essay. Ideology is a word whose origins we know. It was invented by Destutt de Tracy as a term to describe a science of ideas that would trace each idea back to its origins in sensation. In this, its original, sense the word was

used in Italy by Pasquale Galuppi and others in the first half of the nineteenth century, but, as Julien Freund notes,⁵ this sense has hardly anything in common with what we mean by ideology nowadays. For the moment the term entered intellectual circulation it became one of those problem words that bedevil clear thinking in politics. Like bureaucracy, ideology almost immediately acquired negative connotations which rendered difficult any objective examination of the phenomenon it was supposed to describe. Worse still, it came to be used in a number of different senses which are analytically distinct from one another but which overlap in their application to political reality.

We may distinguish three such meanings which are the most influential ones. The first is the view that ideology implies a false conception of reality. The content of ideology is a mentally constructed system of illusion which the ideologist substitutes for reality, though he is not usually conscious of what he is doing. This meaning can be found in Marx and Engels (in the notion of false consciousness) and also, more acceptably, in Eric Voegelin's work, where ideological universes (or "Second Realities") are said to deform reality through the inability or unwillingness of their creators to take account of the full range of man's experience. Ideology, in this sense, is a measure of failure to come to terms with the human condition. The second common meaning of ideology is the view that an ideology is a partial picture of reality, not so much false as incomplete because seen from and conditioned by a particular position in society. This conception is also found in Marx and Engels where it is not clearly distinguished from the first for the good reason that in their theory one particular and limited perspective, that of the proletariat, is identified with the truth. This is why Lenin, for instance, is able to talk happily about communist or proletarian ideology without being embarrassed by the unfavorable connotations that the term has in Marx.

Ideology as a partial and not necessarily misleading view of reality is also the meaning attached to the term by Karl Mannheim, who uses "ideology" to describe a partial view that emphasizes the unchangeable aspects of a situation and "utopia" to describe one that plays up the possibilities for change. But while the Marxist, Lenin, identifies one partial perspective with the truth, Mannheim, who describes his position as "relationist," stresses the importance of taking all perspectives into account to arrive at a more general view.

Thirdly, we have the concept of ideology as, in a dictionary definition cited by von Kuehnelt-Leddihn, "A system of ideas especially concerning social and political life." In contrast to the first meaning of ideology, this definition covers both false and true conceptions of reality, and in relation to the second it covers all partial views, whether ideological or utopian in Mannheim's terms, as well as a more general perspective that takes account of narrower ones in order to transcend them. In this sense, ideology is synonymous with every type of political discourse that attempts to express itself rationally and consistently and especially any discourse that aims to give people sound reasons for adopting one course rather than another. This third, broad conception of ideology can be seen to cover the whole range of political philosophy and probably ethics as well. If then we use the term ideology in this sense to cover any articulate political position, particularly one that connects political positions with metaphysical theories or religious beliefs, conservatives will only be non-ideological or anti-ideological to the extent that they ignore their mental faculties to vegetate as intellectual cripples. This seems to be von Kuehnelt-Leddihn's view, and he attributes the general conservative unwillingness to accept it to historical factors and, especially, to the influence of an Anglo-Saxon prejudice against systematic thought. But is this the whole story? What, we may ask, is von Kuehnelt-Leddihn's reason for choosing of all the available

meanings of the term "ideology" that which is most inclusive and hence least useful for analytical purposes? Certainly, it is a use much favored in the political arena, and that is reason enough for not ignoring it when, for instance, planning a political campaign, but that is no warrant that it will not confuse the issue in an essay like "Utopias and Ideologies."

Throughout my reading of the essay I was haunted by the shadows of my own intellectual masters and Eric Voegelin in particular. Voegelin's remarkable statement, "Ideology is existence in rebellion against God and man" nagged away all too effectively against the force of von Kuehnelt-Leddihn's argument and his use of his crucial terms. Why? Because, in Voegelin's view, ideology connotes not so much systematic political thought as such, as a particular type of thought, thought that is creationist or substitutionist rather than interpretative. And this use throws light on a fundamental problem which is obscured by the broader use of the term. By this I mean that there is a particular type of political thinking that produces, out of its own conceptual resources, an image of reality and existence which is based more upon the subjective preferences of its human creator than on an objective interpretation of reality as it is given in immediate experience. I think that we should reserve the term ideological for the former, creationist, type of thinking not for any arbitrary reason but because it is demanded by the need for critical clarification which is central to political theory. This is a very important matter, for if we ask why the question of ideology is so important today, the answer is that, thanks to technology and the development of media, we are now in a position where what was previously impossible might happen, a point at which the wholesale substitution of illusion for reality could occur at the level of consciousness with all the distortion of humanity that that would imply. George Orwell's *1984* remains the most brilliant literary anticipation of what this might mean, with its analysis of

the "newspeak" of the regime and the careful destruction of the very concept of objective truth under the rule of Big Brother and "Ingsoc." To use ideology in von Kuehnelt-Leddihn's extended sense is to fail to make distinctions that are vital if we are to distinguish between true and false doctrine in politics, and where we fail to do this the price may be high.

Of course to talk of a distinction between true and false teaching in politics implies that we have criteria by which we can judge between them, that we can, broadly, distinguish between political doctrine that is consonant with our knowledge of man's nature and position in the world and that which is not. And this, in turn, means that we must be able to know that position with something approaching certainty. In this sense the whole question of what is political philosophy, and with it the distinction between philosophy and ideology, is bound up with matters that belong strictly to other areas of philosophy, to the theory of being, ontology, and the theory of knowledge, epistemology. One of Leo Strauss' greatest merits as a political philosopher was the way in which, throughout his writings, he brought out these vital connections. Strauss was convinced that there is an order natural to man, in the sense that only by respecting its conditions can we achieve the full potential of our nature. He argued continually that this order was knowable and that to deny its existence makes impossible the very project of political philosophy, which is to replace opinion by knowledge in matters political.

But human knowledge is neither total nor indubitable, and it is this that gives philosophy its peculiar character. Philosophy in its classical sense demystifies but it does so in a special way. For what it reveals is not an ultimate truth about the universe so much as the necessary horizons of human knowledge and existence. This is significant when we recall that one of the characteristics of the ideological waves that have swept across civilization since the eighteenth century is the denial of all such horizons, or

their practical dissolution in a perspective dominated by the ideas of progress, the coming super-man or super-race, and the classless or perfectly coordinated society. In contrast, philosophy, as Strauss reminds us, "is knowledge that one does not know; that is to say, it is knowledge of what one does not know, or awareness of the fundamental problems and, therewith, of the fundamental alternatives regarding their solution that are coeval with human thought. . . . Philosophy is possible only if there is an absolute horizon in contradistinction to the historically changing horizons."⁶

Philosophy, then, is knowledge that is certain insofar as it is aware of its own limitations and respects them. And the philosophy of man, philosophical anthropology of which political theory is part, is therefore largely an account of the ways in which man finds himself limited by his nature and the nature of surrounding reality. In contradistinction to ideology, political philosophy is an area in which the imagination has little part to play, unless it be in that high imagining that we find in writers like Dostoevsky whose image is the clear vision of man as he really is. The prescriptions for correct action that can be derived from such an account are not a matter of a subjective choice among alternatives, which each embraces in accord with a personal political ideal or, as von Kuehnelt-Leddihn has it, *outopos*, but a drawing out of the implications of the position in which man finds himself. This revelation of the fundamental options available to man shows, not only that some apparently desirable goals are not really available at all, but that even among those that are there are good objective reasons for preferring one to the other.

The objectivity of this judgment between options as more or less desirable is founded in the fact that one choice is more in accord with what we know of the potential and limits of human nature and man's being in the world than another, and that it is, in principle, possible to establish a hierarchy

among them. Man does better when he recognizes this hierarchy and acts in a manner consonant with it. That is why Strauss is able to define political philosophy as, "the attempt to know both the nature of political things and the right, or the good, political order."⁷

I do not know how far Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn would accept this line of argument but I feel that his use of the term "ideology" to cover both political thought that recognizes and takes account of man's status in being and that which does not, blurs a vital distinction in political discourse. For out of what we can call the mistake about man, which is also a mistake about reality, come the greatest present dangers to civilization. Which dangers lie in the proliferation throughout the world of aggressive ideologies whose chief distinguishing mark is their failure to recognize and respect the constitutive limitations of man and his situation.⁸

No one has thrown more light on this problem, which is the problem of the genesis and dangers of ideology, than Eric Voegelin. Man, Voegelin teaches, is born into a universe whose reality, which in all circumstances imposes itself upon him, is only made meaningful to him on condition that he recognizes himself as part of a community of being with all that transcends him. "God and man, world and society," he writes, "form a community of being" which is known to man "by virtue of his participation in the mystery of being."⁹ In a brilliant essay, "The Eclipse of Reality,"¹⁰ Voegelin has analyzed what happens when man refuses the conditions of his participation and banishes from his mind awareness of the intelligible links between himself and that which surrounds him: "By an act of imagination man can shrink himself to a self that is 'condemned to be free.' To this shrunken or contracted self . . . God is dead, the past is dead, the present is the flight from the self's non-essential facticity toward being what is not, the future is the field of possibles among which the self must choose its project of being

beyond mere facticity, and freedom is the necessity of making a choice that will determine the self's own being." Modern man is characterized by such contraction, and modern gnostic or ideological thought is structured by the need to live with this contraction and make it bearable.

The peculiar character of the consequent task is obvious when we recall that it is only man's consciousness of himself as a participant in the community of being that makes reality meaningful to him. Inevitably, then, the satisfaction of the needs of the contracted self will involve a distortion of reality. "As neither the man who engages in deforming himself to a self ceases to be a man; nor the surrounding reality of God and man, world and society does change its structure; nor the relations between man and his surrounding reality can be abolished; frictions between the shrunken self and reality are bound to develop. The man who suffers from the disease of contraction, however, is not inclined to leave the prison of his selfhood, in order to remove the frictions. He rather will put his imagination to further work and surround the imaginary self with an imaginary reality apt to confirm the self in its pretense of reality; he will create a Second Reality . . . in order to screen the First Reality of common experience from his view. The frictions consequently, far from being removed, will grow into a general conflict between the world of his imagination and the real world. . . . A reality projected by imagination . . . is not the reality of common experience. Nevertheless, a man's act of deforming himself is as real as the man who commits it, and his act of projecting a Second Reality is as real as the First Reality it intends to hide from view. The imaginator, his act of imagination, and the effects the act has on himself as well as on other people, thus, can claim to be real. Some imaginative constructions of history, designed to shield the contracted self, as for instance those of Comte, or Hegel, or Marx, even have grown into social forces of such strength that their conflicts with

reality form a substantial part of global politics in our time. The man with a contracted self is as much of a power in society and history as an ordinary man, and sometimes a stronger one. The conflict *with* reality turns out to be a disturbance *within* reality."¹¹

When William Croft at the end of the seventeenth century set the Anglican funeral service to music, he left the verses beginning, "Thou knowest, Lord . . ." in the setting that Henry Purcell had composed for the funeral of Queen Mary a few years before, on the grounds that no one could hope to set them better. That is how I see Eric Voegelin's analysis of the eclipse of reality, an analysis which seems to me to penetrate to the heart of the problem of the relationship between the imagined universes of ideological thought and the reality of the universe of common experience. Contraction to a self means rejection of a knowable order inherent in experienced reality. Defense of the contracted self requires the imagining of another, imagined, order. This order is unrealistic but not unreal in its consequences for illusion is at least as strong a spur to action as truth, especially when the illusion is such as to require the rearrangement or transformation of the elements of experience to fit the new requirements.

In this century we have seen too many bloody attempts to give body to "Second Realities," which are in truth exclusive fantasies cut to fit a false view of man's position in the world, to ignore the danger of conflating them with more limited and sober political doctrines under the name of "ideology." And similar considerations apply to von Kuehnelt-Leddihn's use of the term "utopia." "No human being," he writes, "except a child or an imbecile, is without a personal *outopos* or a political-economic utopia which even might have geographic ramifications."¹² But, here again, it is urgent that we distinguish between those political goals which are realizable in human social terms and those that are not. For instance, from the fact

that common endeavor requiring organization is an integral part of any practicable scheme of society, we are able to deduce that while the humanization of hierarchy is a proper goal its total abolition is not. Here, more than with ideology, the theoretical aim of critical clarification has common usage on its side. For "utopia" and "utopian" are commonly used to distinguish ideals and goals that are impractical and unrealistic from those that are consonant with experienced reality. In this sense von Kuehnelt-Leddihn's comprehensive use of "utopia" not only fails to clarify but actually confuses something that is very well understood by the man in the street.¹³

And what of "conservatism," the third term in the trilogy. Noël O'Sullivan has characterized conservatism (or rather what he calls "conservative ideology") as a philosophy of imperfection. This is quite sound provided that we remember in what the imperfection consists. It is imperfect knowledge and less than total control over the universe that makes real man imperfect in relation to the way he may imagine himself. Man is free neither to change his nature nor his place in the universe. His freedom consists in the power to adapt to

or refuse the horizons or limits he discovers. The philosophy of imperfection is thus, more basically, a philosophy of limitations. And insofar as political philosophy is itself the delineation of these limitations, conservatism will in essence consist in the restatement of the insights of the classical political philosophers against ideologies that deny them. Indeed it is remarkable how many of the doctrines propounded by the great generation of conservatives who wrote against the French Revolution read as vindications of the classic conceptions of immutable human nature and natural, ontological, order. Remarkable too is the unforced affinity which such scholars as Strauss and Voegelin find between classical political philosophy and the struggle against ideological tyrannies in the twentieth century. Now, for reasons sketched above, I think it is misleading to call this philosophy an ideology and the ideals it suggests utopian, and it follows that there is something intrinsically anti-ideological and anti-utopian about conservatism. We do not help ourselves by obscuring this and the matter is too important for polite silence.

¹*Modern Age*, Summer 1977, pp. 263-276. ²*Ibid.*, p. 270. ³*Ibid.*, p. 271. ⁴Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1952), pp. 28-9. ⁵Julien Freund, *L'Essence du Politique* (Paris, Editions Sirey, 1965), p. 412. ⁶Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1953), pp. 32-3. ⁷Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy?*, 1959, p. 12. ⁸I have discussed the reasons why such doctrines appeal in "The Anatomy of Ideology,"

P.N. Review (formerly *Poetry Nation*), Vol. 5, No. 1. ⁹Eric Voegelin, *Order and History, Volume I* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1956). ¹⁰In *Phenomenology and Social Reality: Essays in memory of Alfred Schutz*, (The Hague, Martinus Nijhof, 1970), pp. 185-194. ¹¹*Ibid.*, pp. 186-7. ¹²Von Kuehnelt-Leddihn, *op. cit.*, p. 270. ¹³On utopia see the work of Thomas Molnar, especially *Utopia: The Perennial Heresy*, 1971, and *God and the Knowledge of Reality*, 1973.