On Ideology: Second Thoughts
Philip C. Wander

“Whither ideology?” is an intriguing question, to which my immediate response is: Nowhere! Has its moment passed, at least in relation to the way that we ordinarily think of it? Not because the end of ideology has finally come, but because the emergence of the concept in American academic work, as an expression of political commitment in the 1960s, was a response to the slaughter of upwards of four million Vietnamese, who posed absolutely no threat to this country. Its import lay in the fact—if we can set aside for now the fear of over-determinism—that there were emergent civil, human, and anti-war movements that were actively changing the shape and texture of our “civic discourse,” altering a way of looking at the world that emerged out of the Second World War. The ideological turn in criticism pivoted on America’s concerted efforts to expand its sphere of influence to include, if not all of the known world, then that part of it which, during the Cold War, would ultimately benefit from what we now, in a bloodless retrospective, call “proxy wars.”

Beyond Recollection
Proxy wars were waged by the super powers of the Cold War era in re-colonized lands over the bodies of millions of innocent men, women, and children, using conventional, but no less murderous, weapons. Civil/human rights and anti-war movements, in this moment, were advancing not only a sophisticated critique and an appropriate tone of indignation, but also waves of often outrageous, oppositional acts, which is to say, positive and concerted ways of registering dissent.

Half a century later in the present, historical moment, we find ourselves bewildered by the absence (with exceptions) of any sustained protest over the past twenty
years, and this during two wars waged on misplaced revenge and outright lies about the "threat" to our country posed by Afghanistan and Iraq. It was as though, if one listened to the evening news and speeches made by government officials, these military actions had nothing at all to do with oil.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the triumph of freedom, democracy, capitalism, and the American way of life, academic scholarship drew back from ideology, as a concept, as wave after wave of French theory rolled over departments of English and comparative literature in the Ivy League and westward into the great Midwestern Universities and departments of Communication Studies. Waging wars on cliché political terms, master tropes such as Communism, socialism, democracy, Catholicism, human rights, and so on, and recalling the abuse done under cover of such terms—the Stalin trials, imperial acts of domination, and so on—one wondered whether the remnants of May '68 were calling for newer, more persuasive political discourse or for a retreat from political activity in general.

France, in the 1960s, no longer had much of an empire. France had an active Communist Party. May '68 involved a national strike to promote educational reform. The French CP, at the last minute, killed the strike, entering into an alliance with a quite conservative government. In brief, politics and reality in the 1960s era France and the US were quite different. But such differences did not inform academic theory or the various meanings of ideology. As a field, I wrote in 1996,

> We have gone about as far as possible in reading, explicating, and quoting authors we do not know, who write in languages we cannot read, who address issues and audiences in ways that elude us, who live and work in cultures about which we are almost hopelessly ignorant. (Wander 402)

To sort all this out, I urged a way of making sense of communication that I called rhetorical contextualization, a systematic reflection on: (a) the "I" of the author and the not-"I" or who the author is not; (b) what the text did and did not say; (c) what audiences were and were not addressed or explicitly run down; (d) what problems were defined and/or ignored; and (e) what solutions were or were not offered and for whom. The assumption behind rhetorical contextualization is this: The meaning of what is said, in rhetorical theory, includes what is and what is not said. Without negation, the inclusion of what does not appear or was not said, the notion of choice vanishes. In this way, in existing conflicts, our media and everyday discourse, to a great extent, sacrifice the question of what could be or should be said in the here and now. While, in historical conflicts, we ignore or remain oblivious to the alternatives not chosen, along with alternatives that might have or should have been considered.

Whither ideology, domestic and foreign realities? With the collapse of a bio-polar world, as the old USSR slid into the history books, Communism died, socialism was declared terminal, and in the US, liberalism committed to weaving and reweaving the social safety net at home and, after WWII abroad, where a billion human beings then and now are suffering abject poverty, became a target. Concentrations of great wealth invest billions in public relations campaigns to merge Liberalism with Communism,
Socialism, Terrorism, and Foreigners. They buy vast amounts of time in for-profit, mass media to familiarize mass audiences with this hoary monster. They fund political candidates in city, county, state, and national elections determined to save America and the free world from this mythic being. Each of the terms works in both domestic and foreign affairs: Communists, socialists, liberals, and foreigners constitute a threat at home and abroad.

Unwanted, unspeakable facts, perhaps, but what cannot be denied is this: There is little profit in trying to get such facts, footnotes flying, into for-profit mass media or, for that matter, into venues maintained by professional associations called scholarly journals or university press books. As was the case then, during Vietnam, it is the case now that the partial truths to be shared through criticism, scholarly and civic, no matter how well argued or how important they might be, run into resistance from critics, editors, producers, and publishers embedded in institutional arrangements favoring yeah-saying and silence in relation to controversial issues.

**A Re-Orientation**

Maybe there is another, more fruitful way to say what has to be said. So I will now disengage from blood drenched Vietnam-war prose and the sea fog enveloping verbal disputes, even around a word as fecund as “ideology,” to focus on far more overwhelming and troubling crises than those summoned up by this or that imperialistic adventure, however gut wrenching and massive the slaughter going on at a particular time and place. This brings us back to the epigraph from Octavio Paz:

> theory is gray: green the tree of life.

Paz, a poet and essayist, received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1990 and was also a diplomat. He served as Mexico’s ambassador to France and India. Paz is a subtle thinker and writer, even on political issues. He is able to enchant even when he is deadly serious. In 1970, he delivered the Herbert Read Lecture in London on technology and politics. In it he commented on a “change in consciousness” that had occurred during the course of his lifetime. The change he referred to had to do with “the modern.” In his youth, in the early twentieth century, the modern was filled with promise, guaranteed progress to the end of time. Now, a bruised and decayed modern finds its driving myths fallen into a pit of unease, more likely to inspire despair than joy in what it holds for the future.

And what caused modernity’s precipitous drop? Paz answers with one word: the “bomb”!

Although the “bomb” has not destroyed the world, he declared, in the midst of the Cold War, it has destroyed our idea of the world. Then, taking the long view of things, Paz reflected on the fact that the critique of mythology undertaken by philosophy, begun during the Renaissance, had become a critique of philosophy. Or, as Paz put it:

> Time may be consumed in a ball of fire that will put an end all at once to the dialectics of mind and the evolution of species, to the republic of equals and the tower...
In this moment, he thought, we are rediscovering a feeling that gripped “the Aztecs, Hindus, and Christians of the year 1000” (124). Technology begins as a negation of the image of the world, but technology ends as an image of the destruction of the world.

Paz was, well, partly wrong. Earlier, in the modern era, fears about world-destroying technology were expressed. In 1936, in Vienna, Elias Canetti, also a future Nobel Laureate (1981), gave a speech celebrating the fiftieth birthday of the great novelist, Hermann Broch. Canetti’s speech was not just about literature. He also talked about the “greatest danger ever to emerge in the history of mankind,” a danger that had chosen his generation as its victim. Canetti called this danger the “defenselessness of breathing” (13).

What was this earlier greatest danger, this threat to breathing that transfixed Canetti and his generation? The specter of “gas warfare”! Canetti placed Broch’s work between war and war, between gas war and gas war. Or, more precisely, between the Great War and, peering into the abyss in 1936, a new and growing threat of a gas war to come, what we now call the Second World War.

But why has this threat, deployed on the battle fields in Europe during the Great War, along with the images, so vivid at the time, of young men who had lost their gas masks, silently screaming and tearing at their chests, as their lungs turned to pus; why has this threat to being able to breathe on the battlefield been all but forgotten? Was this because the generation that faced it has passed? Was this because our notion of history comes from costume dramas seen in films and on TV? Or was this because depicting warfare in such a way would nauseate audiences? All of the above, I suppose, but largely because the horror of gas war has become outdated, quaint. Quaint for the same reason that the “bomb,” those dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, has, in its turn, become quaint. The prospect of these fears simply ceases to be spectacular!

Weapons unspeakable used on the battlefield, weapons unthinkable used on cities, conventional weapons unimaginable in their destructive powers have so far outstripped earlier miracles of military technology—no matter how devastating they were and would still be—recalling them is a little like entering into a museum. Weapons of mass destruction (WMD), in our time, if loosed in another runaway war, a Third World War, could and probably would extinguish all life on the planet.

But there is a second threat to life. Not from new and improved WMD, but from the toxic waste, the ocean of poisons pouring into land, air, and water day after day, year after year. Over the long run, this may be a more effective and lasting way to destroy the world. Global corporations who stand to lose in the short run from shutting down or cleaning up dirty industries, taking dirty products off the market, being denied the right to dump waste on underdeveloped countries, reservations where colored people live, or the poor side of town (issues associated with the environmental justice movement) pay millions to PR firms and lobbyists for “delay” (i.e., ways of holding off necessary policy changes).
So serious are the threats to life in our generation that argument is slowly begin-
ning to turn on questions of purpose, evidence, and credible sources of information.\textsuperscript{7} Kate Ravilious, a freelance writer on science in the UK, recently interviewed promi-
nent scientists for the \textit{Guardian} on the question: What are our prospects for a disaster
free future? Sir Martin Rees, astronomer royal and professor of cosmology and astro-
physics at the University of Cambridge responded:

Some natural threats, such as earthquakes and meteorite impacts, remain the same
throughout time, while others are aggravated by our modern-interconnected world.
But now we also need to consider threats that are human induced. (Ravilious)

He gauged the odds of avoiding disaster at about 50-50. This was, of course, before
the triple cataclysm—9.0 earthquake, tsunami, and imminent nuclear meltdowns—in
Japan on March 11, 2011.

With war, we can and have imagined the worst. Our collective imaginary is filled
with scenes of blasted, charred, flooded, and desolated land, populated by gangs of
mutants, living under ground, using slings and arrows and post-modern military
weapons to kill mutants enlisted in other gangs, or covered with hideous sores, try-
ing, through time travel, to come back to our present to stop the actions and inac-
tions that led to a miserable and all but hopeless future.\textsuperscript{8}

\textbf{Reflections}

And who, among a growing menu of prophetic theorists, Marx, Trotsky, James, Du
Bois, Burke, Said, Sontag, Chomsky, Habermas, Foucault, Derrida, Baudrillard,
Žižek, Kristeva, Spivak, etc., are we to turn for succor, reassurance, and transparency?
None! Not one, or a gang of four, or sixty-four, if one can count that far, or, for those
still counting Ronen, five hundred. But maybe there is one, perhaps you, who, now
weighed down with post-9/11 shifts in fashions in academic theory and theorists,
may surface at some future date, if a future there be.

Recalling pre-political, pre-theoretical, pre-movement moments, one discovers
that s/he has choices to make, promises to keep, and opportunities to define her/
himself through action. Michel Foucault, a theorist whom I have read and admired,
but whom some have suggested (mistakenly) that I have rejected out of hand, put
the matter this way, answering a question put to him by a close friend about his
(Foucault’s) political activism:

\begin{quote}
Every time I have tried to do a piece of theoretical work it has been on the basis
of elements of my own experience: always in connection with processes I saw unfold-
ing around me. It was always because I thought I identified cracks, silent tremors,
and dysfunctions in things I say, institutions I was dealing with, or my relations
with others, that I set out to do a piece of work, and each time was partly a frag-
ment of autobiography. I am not a retired activist who would now like to go back
on duty. My way of working hasn’t changed much; but what I expect from it is that
it will continue to change me. (173)
\end{quote}

I could have quoted Marx, Emma Goldman, Sartre, Habermas, Mark Bryant, the man
who delivers our mail, or my dear friend, Keith R. Sanders who passed recently.
Words inspiring, eloquent, to the point, words that must be said, and in the saying convey the potential for change. I commend the following words to you, in my seventieth year, not as a way of doing scholarship and/or criticism, but as a way of life.

*green theory, green praxis, conserving the tree of life*

Aristotle’s *Politics* maps out the ancient political games people continue to play. His political unit of analysis was, of course, the city-state where those who favored rule by the few in the interests of wealth (oligarchy) warred against those who favored rule by the many in the interests of the poor (democrats). And those who favored rule by the one (monarchy or tyranny) struggled with those who favored rule by the few in the interests of the whole who were critiquing what we would now call the ideological limits of the other factions or parties.

Translated into contemporary American politics, the important political unit, in the here and now, is the nation-state. There are those who favor rule by the many (i.e., poor, working class, the people, etc.), or democracy, and those who favor rule by the few in the interests of wealth (personal, family, corporate, etc.), or oligarchy. Aristotle held that the way to moderate conflicts between the few and the many, in order to avoid civil war, was to establish a system of arbitration committed to rendering justice to any or all disputants, rich or poor, at least in theory, since slaves and women did not count for much and were not allowed to participate in the political sphere. Aristotle thought it desirable to pursue justice in arbitrating disputes between city-states, but thought it hopeless, as there was no political unit capable of enforcing judgments in relation to the claims being made. Thus, between a rich and powerful city-state and a relatively poor and powerless city-state, there could be no justice, however desirable it might be in avoiding violent conflict.

In relation to political structure and conflicts between rich and poor, the analogy between Greek city-states and contemporary nation-states is useful, but ultimately disastrous in ways unimaginable to the ancient Greeks. For Aristotle, teaching in post-war Athens (the Peloponnesian war), disaster meant civil war within and between Greek city-states. One could be prevented, if justice prevailed, and the other could be staved off or moderated, if the quality of civic discourse were such that the few and the many could talk meaningfully in public about the shared consequences of horrifically bad foreign policy.

What Aristotle did not advocate, though he envisioned its potential, was a new political unit enabling Greek city-states to adjudicate their complaints and have the judgments enforced. He was dealing with existing political structures and there were none that could impose the rule of law and the dictates of justice on Greek city-states. That they would have a better chance of survival, individually or collectively did not carry enough weight to be taken seriously by the Athenians, even after the collapse of the Athenian empire. A larger political and more inclusive unit was all but unthinkable.

Contemporary nation-states, even after two world wars, still operate pretty much as Greek city-states. The difference being that, unlike the ancient Greeks who risked the destruction of their city-state and, in extreme cases, the death of all adult males.
and having their women and children sold into slavery, our potential and irrevocable penalty for a third or fourth world war and our imminent failure to solve problems regarding the world-wide erosion of our environment is the extermination of life on the planet, rich and poor, powerful and powerless alike. This truth has not yet entered into our political units or, at least, has not yet made its way, through the various national and transnational ideologies, to create a global political unit able to resolve or moderate disputes and encourage necessary cooperation related to the interests of life on the planet. In this void, the anarchy of nation-states continues and our collective global failures promise a quite practical end of time. In other words, we often find ourselves blocked and legally prevented from advocating anything beyond blind submission to whatever nationalist political unit in which we find ourselves.

Whither ideology? Nowhere and everywhere, and if we cannot now, in the privacy of our own imagination and the collectivity of our action, find a way out of the labyrinth within which we are gathering up future generations to feed the minotaur we have created, then God help us to help our selves, our people, our fellow citizens, and the whole of life on the planet now and in the future.

Notes

[1] For a more personalized take on these issues, see Wander, “Foreword.”
[2] For a classic treatment of this issue, see Franklyn S. Haiman’s two essays on “The Rhetoric of the Streets.”
[4] This was the passage that my late friend Michael Calvin McGee, in a PhD seminar at Iowa and on his website, told his students he never wanted to see quoted. He called me up to make sure that I read his rejoinder.
[6] In the area of nuclear waste management, for example, another difficulty discussed by Stauffacher and Moser also contributes to this delay in environmental reform: the collaboration between natural and social scientists to frame problems, identify solutions and affect policy change.
[7] Smil provides a technically informed, refined, non-alarmist but not altogether reassuring trend analysis of looming natural and manmade disasters.
[8] The scenes that come to mind are from movies such as Akira Kurosawa’s Dreams (1990) and John Hillcoat’s the Road (2009).
[9] I am heartened by the body of work on environmental and green criticism produced in the field of communication studies to inform us, to help shape critical viewpoints, and to point to productive and ethical courses of action. The early rhetorical scholarship by Cox, Farrell and Goodnight, Schiappa and Cantrill, and Orovec comes to mind. The leading figure, especially related to nuclear discourse, is Bryan Taylor. Though not an exhaustive list, other names also come to mind: Tarla Rai Peterson, Dennis Jaehne, Kevin DeLuca, William Kinsella, Phaedra Pazzullo, Brant Short, Danielle Endres, Mark Moore, Anne Marie Todd, Gorden Mitchell, and more.
[10] Barker worked with the British government, during two World Wars and lived through the Great Depression. His experience of global politics coupled with his classical training
reveals itself in his narrative and his footnotes, where socialism is related to democratic politics in ancient Athens and the early twentieth century and in relation to oligarchic politics then and the ideology of capitalism. His classical training and the world of affairs reveals itself in his appendixes, where relevant selections from Rhetoric and Ethics are related to the Politics. Kennedy situates his translation of the Rhetoric in relation to politics, making it explicit in his subtitle, “A Theory of Civic Discourse.” The gradual decline of civic discourse in this country, its quality and its influence, is undeniable during the rise of the American Empire after the Second World War, especially during the period following the second invasion of Iraq. Thucydides’ history links the decline in ancient Athens to the rise of the Athenian Empire. According to Conner, the ideological devolution reveals itself, when the various speeches are read serially and in relation to one another. This line of thought is sobering with the rise of China as a global force and the decline of Japan and the U.S., especially after 9/11, the 2008 global economic meltdown, and now 3/11 of the Great East Japan Earthquake.

Works Cited


