
Review

C. M. Nichols u.a. (Hrsg.): Ideology in U.S. Foreign Relations

Nichols, Christopher McKnight; Milne, David (Hrsg.): *Ideology in U.S. Foreign Relations. New Histories*, New York: Columbia University Press 2022. ISBN: 978-0231201803; 507 S.

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In 1987, Michael Hunt emphasized the importance of ideology for U.S. foreign policy and challenged scholars of U.S. foreign relations to reconstruct the ideological presuppositions that had guided foreign-policy makers in the past, rather than treating American statesmen as purely rational creatures tasked with pursuing an allegedly objective national interest. His call to consider ideology not merely negatively as preventing one from seeing reality as it is, but also more positively as “an indispensable guide” that allows foreign-policy makers to make sense of an “infinitely complex and otherwise bewildering present” and hence act purposefully in a chaotic world has been heeded by innumerable scholars since.^[1] The volume under review here offers a welcome opportunity to take stock and assess the current state of the research on the ideological underpinnings of U.S. foreign policy. In 22 chapters of about 20 pages in length each, the contributors investigate the role that ideas and ideology played in America’s external conduct from the origins of early America’s racially coded citizenship in the late colonial period to the prevalence of neoliberal and militarized unilateralist thought in the post-Cold War era.

As discussing each contribution exceeds the scope of this review, I will point to some of the questions that have occupied historians of U.S. foreign relations who tried to incorporate ideas and ideology into their analyses and explain how they are dealt with in this volume.

1.) How does one measure and prove the impact of an idea or ideology on actual decisions? The most straightforward way is to reconstruct how a power broker adopted it and this approach is used by Marc-William Palen, who, in his instructive contribution, traces the influence of British free-trade activist Richard Cobden in the U.S. Palen argues that American Cobdenites left the economically nationalist Republican Party in 1884 to promote their ideas among Democrats, their endeavors coming to full fruition when Cordell Hull became Secretary of State in 1934 and subsequently paved the way for the 1947 General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. However, the question of how to link an ideology to the adoption of a certain policy is not just a methodological issue, but also affects which subjects are deemed worthy of diplomatic historians’ attention. In a fascinating interpretation of Star Wars (The Original Trilogy), Daniel Immerwahr shows that its creator, George Lucas, who was deeply influenced by the Vietnam War, intended the films to have a message highly critical of U.S. foreign policy since the Second World

War, with the evil galactic empire, in possession of superior technology and driven by the desire to unite the galaxy under uniform rules, representing the U.S. and its efforts to modernize traditional societies in the Third World, and the rebels standing for the many Asian peoples resisting U.S. imperialism. The irony of the story, as Immerwahr reveals, lies in the fact that audiences failed to grasp Lucas's intended message, the "evil empire" becoming equated with the Soviet Union in the public imagination in the Age of Reagan. As intriguing as his reading of Star Wars as a comment on America's international conduct is, the question of whether the Star Wars movies had any actual effect on U.S. foreign policy and whether this analysis is therefore an exercise in political or cultural history remains.

2.) How can you assess, compare, and rank ideologies in terms of their rationality, sustainability, and success? Several contributors, such as Benjamin Coates in his chapter on civilization as ideology, understand ideologies as mere rationalizations of existing power hierarchies or justifications for immoral foreign policies. But can there not also be ideologies that need to be evaluated more positively? After all, some ideas and ideologies have had disastrous consequences, whereas others have resulted in rather effective policies. Matthew Karp makes a case in point in his contribution on the early Republican Party, arguing that there was not only a "proslavery ideology" in antebellum America guiding Southern slaveowners, but also an "antislavery ideology" (p. 154) that informed the worldview of leading Republicans like William Seward. As ideology is "inescapable," as Hunt emphasizes, it cannot be condemned in toto.

3.) A related question is whether and how scholars can analyze ideologies unideologically. Can a scholar take up a perspective from which to neutrally evaluate an ideology? The article by Penny von Eschen on how U.S. policy makers equated freedom with capitalism to promote neoliberal policies after the end of the Cold War demonstrates the pitfalls of attacking foreign-policy makers for their ideologies. When scholars make sweeping claims – in this case that there is a link between George Bush's defense of the interests of the oil industry during his presidency (1989–1993) and the attack on the Capitol on January 6, 2021 – they run the risk of appearing just as ideological as the foreign-policy makers they criticize.

4.) This issue in turn brings up the question of agency in analyses of U.S. foreign-policy ideologies. As the editors rightly contend in their introduction and conclusion, ideologies are most effective when they are not perceived as such. But if we are all ideological, who created ideologies in the first place? To what extent can we choose our ideological commitments? In how far can actors consciously construct, shape, and develop ideologies? An instructive example of such (semi)conscious ideology-building are the neoconservatives who started out as liberals, but were shocked by the student protests and anti-Vietnam demonstrations in the 1960s and 1970s. As Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins and Michael Franczak analyze in their excellent chapter, these disillusioned liberals concluded that the consumer society of the 1950s had led to irresponsible individualism and selfish hedonism among the younger generation and that a new ideology, combining traditional values with an assertive foreign policy and an unapologetic celebration of capitalism, was needed to unite the U.S. again in the midst of divisive civil strife and to give its foreign policy purpose.

5.) A final question concerns definitions. What is an ideology after all? What is the difference to mere perceptions and stereotypes? Is fear an emotion or also an ideology, as Andrew Preston posits in his chapter, in which he traces how Americans, paradoxically, felt increasingly threatened the more powerful the U.S. became. How can ideology in turn be distinguished from particular political and military strategies? Daniel Bessner, for example, skillfully traces the organizational and personal origins of project RAND, in which the Army Air Forces (AAF) tasked the Douglas Aircraft Corporation to research the subject of intercontinental warfare in 1946 and which served as an inspiration for the Cold War-era military-industrial-scientific networks. While his analysis is knowledgeable and enlightening, it is not immediately apparent how ideology fits into this story – unless one counts the belief of this project’s architects in scientific progress and the importance of technological superiority in military affairs as ideological.

The editors must be commended for assembling such a diverse set of chapters, which not only address subjects from all periods of U.S. history, but also take various perspectives on how ideas and ideologies have come to bear on foreign policy and thus bring these important questions and how they can be answered in different ways into clear light. “Ideology in U.S. Foreign Relations: New Histories” does an excellent job of revealing the complex relationship between ideational factors and purposeful action in American foreign policy. The chapters are all well written and offer a broad canvas of topics that historians of U.S. foreign policy can examine through the lens of ideology, thus demonstrating the vitality and fruitfulness of the subfield.

Note:

[1] Michael H. Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*, New Haven 1987, p. 12.

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