



WHICH ONE ARE YOU: IDEOLOGUE OR PRAGMATIST?

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One of the staple arguments of American liberals, from Presidents Woodrow Wilson to Bill Clinton, from education reformer John Dewey to New York Times columnist Tom Friedman is that they “don’t believe in labels.” Liberals are “pragmatists,” and “realists,” and “empiricists.” They only care about “what works.” Conservatives, meanwhile, are “ideologues” – or extremists, or dogmatists, or just plain lunatics – who are blinded by ideology.

Here’s what President Barack Obama said on the subject: “What is required is a new declaration of independence, not just in our nation, but in our own lives from ideology and small thinking, prejudice and bigotry.”

Did you catch that? If you have an ideology, you belong amongst the bigots and the mentally confused.

Once you start paying attention, you’ll hear variations on this claim all over the place. In truth, it is a very old technique, pioneered by none other than Napoleon Bonaparte, who sought to demonize his critics as mesmerized theorists enthralled to an ideology, while he put the needs of the nation above all considerations.

Marx picked up the technique, arguing that only the people who agreed with him were free of mind-warping ideology. The desirability and inevitability of socialism was to them a scientific fact, and therefore anyone who disagrees with scientific fact must be, in effect, brainwashed.

In the 20th Century, the American Progressives offered their own version of the same idea. They created a whole philosophical school—Pragmatism—which as a matter of principle rejected philosophical principles. William James, the most important founder of Pragmatism argued that we should measure ideas not by whether they are right or wrong, but by whether they “work.” Ideas are right if they have “cash value,” according to James.

Herbert Croly, the founder of the New Republic, responding to the criticism that his liberal magazine was too pro-Mussolini—whose ideas seemed to be working in Italy at the time—said it well: “If there are any abstract liberal principles, we do not know how to formulate them. Nor if they are formulated by others do we recognize their authority. Liberalism, as we understand it, is an activity.”

Contemporary American liberalism has inherited this pose. It is certain it knows “what works” – liberalism! And what is liberalism? What liberals do! It’s an activity! And they denigrate opposing viewpoints not as competing ideas or positions, but as the products of a warped, “ideological” worldview.

How often do you hear people say, “I don’t believe in labels?” Whether it’s liberal politicians, TV news anchors, columnists, cable news hosts or your brother-in-law, Harry, the line always goes something like this: “Why can’t we move beyond these partisan labels? Why can’t we get beyond this philosophical divide and get to the hard work of dealing with the problems facing the American people?”

Warning: People only say these things when they want you to shut up and get with their program.

What you never hear them say is: “We need to move beyond these partisan labels, we need to get beyond the philosophical divide and for that reason I’m going to abandon all of my principles and agree with you.”

Look, I’m not saying that liberal ideological positions are wrong. That’s another discussion. My point is that liberals are wrong when they say they don’t have ideological principles in the first place.

Moreover, there’s nothing wrong with having ideological principles. To say that you have ideological principles isn’t really all that different from saying that you simply have principles.

Like with anything else, there are good ideologies and bad ideologies, good ideas, bad ideas. Think of ideology as a checklist of your priorities – your first principles. Do you consider economic freedom important or trivial? Is the right to life fundamental or frivolous? Is private property a more valuable principle than economic redistribution? These are all ideological questions, and asking them doesn’t make you closed-minded, it makes you more serious-minded.

There is no “un-ideological” answer to these questions. On abortion, for example, if you come down on the pro-life side, you’re being ideological and if you come down on the pro-choice side you’re still being ideological.

The difference is that people who take their principles seriously understand that they have principles. And when they string them together, they have an ideology.

It is the people who constantly reject rigorous thinking because they are afraid to be led beyond their easy instincts who are closed-minded. The fear of hypocrisy, of judging people, of making hard choices on principle: this is the fear of ideology that causes people to retreat into relativism or nihilism or what we might call here no-labelism.

As G.K. Chesterton wrote: “Trees have no dogmas and turnips are singularly broad-minded.”

In terms of ideology, serious people should aspire to be more than a tree or a turnip.

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