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Editorial overview: Five observations about tradition and progress in the scientific study of political ideologies

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Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences 2020, 34:iii–vii

For a complete overview see the [Issue](#)

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cobeha.2020.09.001>

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Writing for *American Psychologist* in 1974, William Dember (1928–2006), a cognitive-perceptual psychologist at the University of Cincinnati, argued that political and religious ideologies make ‘ordinary motives look pale and insignificant,’ that they are ‘trains of thought, or rather whole ‘transportation systems,’ dominating other sources of behavioral control,’ and that they are capable of overriding ‘conscience or even impulses toward self-preservation’ ([1], pp. 166-167). Belief systems are often shaped by social, economic, and cultural forces, but they also have the power to move human history, as in Communist and fascist movements of the 20th century. And as [Webber, Kruglanski, Molinario, and Jasko \(this issue\)](#) point out, ideology plays a crucial role in legitimizing (and, for that matter, delegitimizing) political violence.

Despite the topic’s importance, for many years the study of ideology was rare in psychology and other behavioral sciences. Its neglect was sometimes justified by the claim that ordinary citizens are non-ideological, that is, profoundly innocent or ignorant of ideological concerns [2]. According to a PsycInfo search, from 1935 to 2004 there were only five books, articles, and dissertations per year on the theme of *political ideology*. In the last 15 years, there have been at least 14 times that many published contributions on a yearly basis (see Ref. [3]).

No doubt there are many reasons for the resurgence of scientific and popular interest in the topic of ideology. One possibly pivotal moment in psychology was the 2003 publication of ‘Political Conservatism as Motivated Social Cognition’ in *Psychological Bulletin*, which included the figure that appears on the cover of this special issue. The article reviewed, synthesized, and codified classic research programs inspired by the writings of T.W. Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel Levinson, R. Nevitt Sanford, Silvan Tomkins, Milton Rokeach, Richard Christie, Stephen Sales, Glenn Wilson, Norman Feather, Philip Tetlock, Bob Altemeyer, Jim Sidanius, Felicia Pratto, and John Duckitt, among others. The authors of the 2003 article proposed that left-right political orientation is linked to underlying epistemic and existential motives, including situational and dispositional variability in psychological tendencies to tolerate (versus reduce) uncertainty and threat, and that this variability helps to explain why people on the right favor tradition and hierarchy, whereas people on the left favor progress and equality [4].

Fifteen years later two meta-analysis based on much larger bodies of literature, including 181 studies of epistemic motivation involving 130 000 individual participants [5] and almost 100 studies of existential motivation involving 360 000 participants [6] supported many of the

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empirical observations from the 2003 article: whereas liberals and leftists tend to score higher on measures of openness, tolerance of ambiguity and uncertainty, integrative complexity, personal need for cognition, and cognitive reflection, conservatives and rightists tend to score higher on subjective perceptions of threat, measures of cognitive and perceptual rigidity, dogmatism, and personal needs for order, structure and closure. Furthermore, exposure to objectively threatening circumstances — such as terrorist attacks [7–9] and shifts in racial demography ([10,11]) — were found to elicit modest conservative shifts in public opinion. These last findings are consistent with other reports that pandemic diseases — such as Ebola and COVID-19 — may create a social psychological environment that is more conducive to conservative and rightist ideologies than to liberal and leftist ideologies [12–15].

This special issue collects some of the wide-ranging perspectives that have emerged since the 2003 article about the the origins, antecedents, concomitants, and consequences of political ideologies. They represent the current opinions not only of psychologists and political scientists, but also of behavioral geneticists, neuroscientists, and other behavioral researchers. We made an effort to invite scholars who study ideology in a variety of national and cross-national contexts; adopt different methods and approaches; are focused on a diverse set of ideological antecedents, contents, and outcomes; and represent different and, in some cases, clashing perspectives. When we consider these important contributions as a whole, five observations stand out in particular.

Our first observation is that according to most researchers in the field, but perhaps not all, left-right ideological asymmetries clearly do exist. That is, much recent evidence supports the hypothesis that there are meaningful psychological differences — and in some cases perhaps even physiological differences, although the evidence is less consistent (Smith and Warren, [this issue](#)) — between liberal leftists and conservative rightists. People on the left and right appear to differ with respect to neural structures and functional activity (Nam, [this issue](#)); cognitive reflection and rational thinking (Baron, [this issue](#)); emotional expression and regulation strategies (Pliskin, Ruhrman, and Halperin, [this issue](#)); fairness beliefs concerning economic inequality ([16]; Trump, [this issue](#)); authoritarian values and dispositions (Nilsson and Jost, [this issue](#)); generalized conspiratorial mindsets [17]; the commission of hate crimes (Badaan and Jost, [this issue](#)) and political violence (Webber et al., [this issue](#)); and the types of social change and collective action they are willing to support (Becker, [this issue](#)). There can be little doubt that this litany of behavioral differences both reflects and amplifies the dynamics of political polarization within societies (Ford and Feinberg, [this issue](#); Harel, Maoz, and Halperin, [this issue](#); Heltzel and Laurin, [this issue](#)) and may help to explain why political polarization is often asymmetrical, with an intensity and extremity on the right that is not often matched on the left [18–21].

A second observation is that context matters. That is, none of the above should be taken to mean that differences between leftists and rightists are immutable, unbridgeable, or unaffected by social and cultural dynamics. Since the time of Adorno *et al.* [22], it has never been the intention of political psychologists to reify or essentialize (in biological or other terms) differences between leftists and rightists. Historical, cultural, and economic factors were always part of the explanation for ideological manifestations, including the rise of fascism. Consequently, there is no reason to assume that ideological differences observed in one context will necessarily generalize to

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other contexts. It would be wrong to assume, for instance, that conservatives are more sensitive than liberals to *every potentially threatening stimulus* (Landau-Wells and Saxe, [this issue](#)), more rigid on *every cognitive or perceptual task* (Zmigrod, [this issue](#)), more disapproving of *every dissimilar out-group* (Crawford & Brandt, [this issue](#)), or more susceptible to *every conspiracy theory* (Sutton & Douglas, [this issue](#)).

By way of illustration, consider the role of empathy. There are times when liberals and conservative behave similarly; for example, both feel more empathy toward members of their own political in-group than the out-group. Nevertheless, when other contextual factors are controlled, liberals tend to feel more empathy toward a wider circle of people, including strangers and foreigners [23,24]. And let us consider authoritarianism. Depending in large part upon one's definition, it is possible to observe some authoritarian tendencies such as dogmatism and closed-mindedness on the part of liberals (although it is always possible that those individuals would be more authoritarian if they did not embrace liberal ideology). But on ideologically neutral measures that are carefully crafted to be devoid of specific left-right political contents, conservatives consistently respond in what is considered by social scientists to be a more authoritarian manner (Nilsson and Jost, [this issue](#)).

There is also the related matter of cognitive and perceptual rigidity. Earlier research by Zmigrod, Rentfrow, and Robbins [25] demonstrated that politically conservative Brits (and supporters of Brexit) exhibited higher levels of cognitive rigidity on various politically neutral tasks, in comparison with liberal Brits (and opponents of Brexit). Zmigrod ([this issue](#)) reports that on some behavioral tasks cognitive rigidity increases with ideological extremity on the left as well as the right. However, it is clear from her Figure 1 that the effect of extremity exists in addition to, and does not eliminate, the ideological asymmetry: the maximum level of cognitive flexibility on all three of the tasks she administered was left-of-center (see also Refs. [26,27]).

As a final example, consider system justification. In nearly every country that has been studied so far, conservative rightists are more likely than liberal leftists to endorse system-justifying beliefs, which reflect confidence in the legitimacy of the social system as a whole and satisfaction with the status quo (Napier, Bettinsoli, & Suppes, [this issue](#)). However, this does not appear to be the case in France, where high system-justifiers are left-of-center, pro-immigration, and anti-authoritarian (Langer, Vasilopoulos, McAvay, & Jost, [this issue](#)). This suggests that post-Enlightenment, secular-humanist policies and institutions constitute the established social order in France.

As long as it does not obscure the big picture (or the proverbial forest for the trees), there is a clear sense in which the identification of novel contextual moderators represents scientific progress in the study of ideology. It is useful to know, for instance, the circumstances under which: cognitive reappraisal strategies of regulating intense emotions lead people to adopt more liberal — or more conservative — attitudes (Pliskin et al., [this issue](#)); people who are compensating for a diminished sense of personal control may turn to liberal — rather than conservative — ideologies (De Leon & Kay, [this issue](#)); and the endorsement of system-justifying beliefs is associated with increased versus decreased subjective well-being (Napier et al., [this issue](#)). At their best, these types of contextual analyses add complexity, nuance, and sophistication to our understanding of political psychology, especially when they are based on solid theoretical principles. Of course, new amendments would be impossible if the original contributions had not

been laid down by political psychologists in the tradition of Adorno and colleagues and the many researchers their work inspired.

And yet we caution readers to keep in mind that evidence of contextual variability in ideological differences does not justify mindless equivocation, moral or political relativism, or both-sideology. Blanket assertions that, for instance, ‘liberals are just like conservatives’ when it comes to cognitive rigidity, intolerance, prejudice, conspiratorial thinking, and so on, may serve the convenient function of maintaining the researcher’s image of Swiss-style neutrality, but such claims almost always result in some degree of obfuscation. Demonstrating that there are conditions under which the behavior of leftists and rightists is similar can be useful, but it is not at all the same as demonstrating that there are *no important or meaningful differences* between the left and the right.

A third observation is that — in addition to attenuating, or in some cases, even reversing the direction of ideological asymmetries — social and cultural contexts matter in many other important ways. And yet part of our job as behavioral scientists is to make reasonable and useful generalizations that will apply across individuals, groups, and societies. To do so, we must therefore study ideologies in as many different countries and regions as possible, and to consider how specific features of the context are likely to influence the general phenomena of interest.

There are social and cultural processes that affect ideological outcomes within societies as well. For instance, political attitudes are shaped by media exposure to a considerable degree (Hoewe & Peacock, *this issue*). It is crucial for behavioral scientists to consider the interaction between ‘top-down’ influences such as elite communication and ‘bottom-up’ influences such as psychological needs and motives [28]. How people use language and social representations matters, too. For instance, people do not necessarily use ideological terms such as liberal and conservative (or left and right) identically in the U.S. versus Europe (Caprara, *this issue*) and in Eastern versus Western Europe (Kende & Krekó, *this issue*). Furthermore, cultural and economic attitudes often go together, but not always. Some people, such as libertarians in the U.S., consider themselves to be socially or culturally liberal and economically conservative (Johnston & Ollerenshaw, *this issue*). Finally, it stands to reason that some political or psychological events are more likely to affect cultural attitudes, whereas others are more likely to affect economic attitudes.

A fourth observation is that researchers are now using multiple methods to investigate the psychological underpinnings of a broader constellation of political ideologies, only some of which are strongly linked to the left-right dimension. This is yet another sign of progress, for these

contributions will lead to new discoveries on new themes. The field is moving toward the use of more sophisticated experimental paradigms (Tappin, Pennycook, & Rand, *this issue*) and incorporating novel techniques, such as computational modeling (Wheeler et al., *this issue*) and cognitive neuroimaging (Landau-Wells and Saxe, *this issue*; Nam, *this issue*). Researchers are not only probing overtly political ideologies such as nationalism (Cichocka and Cislak, *this issue*), right-wing populism (Kende and Krekó, *this issue*), and neoliberalism (Bettache, Beatty, and Chu, *this issue*), but also seemingly personal beliefs with political implications, such as male superiority (McDermott, *this issue*), fragile masculinity (DiMuccio & Knowles, *this issue*), heteronormativity (van der Toorn, Pliskin, & Morgenroth, *this issue*), utopian thinking (Kashima & Fernando, *this issue*), and beliefs about climate change (Hennes, Kim, & Remache, *this issue*).

A fifth and final observation is that behavioral scientists are beginning to develop and implement practical interventions for society based on the latest empirical evidence. Some initial steps in that direction can be seen, for example, in the work of Bruneau et al. (*this issue*) on depolarization interventions, Pliskin, Ruhrman, and Halperin (*this issue*) on conflict reduction interventions, and Horgan (*this issue*) and Webber et al. (*this issue*) on interventions designed to reduce ideological extremity and political radicalism. This is yet another sign of progress with respect to the scientific study of political ideologies. Now more than ever, the world needs for at least some of these ambitious, well-conceived, scientifically grounded efforts to succeed — and soon.

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