

H-Diplo ROUNDTABLE XXVI-30

Azar Gat. *Ideological Fixation: From the Stone Age to Our Modern Culture Wars*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2022. ISBN: 9780197646700.

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Introduction by Todd K. Shackelford, Oakland University

I am delighted to introduce this H-Diplo Roundtable Review of Azar Gat's most recent book, *Ideological Fixation: From the Stone Age to Our Modern Culture Wars*. What follows are thoughtful reviews of this book from four leading scholars—Louise Barrett, Robert J. Lieber, Catherine Salmon, and Alan Sica—and a response to these reviews from Gat. These reviewers represent a broad cross-section of disciplinary fields in the social and life sciences, including Government and International Affairs, Evolutionary Psychology, Animal Behavior, and Sociology. Gat, in turn, is a leading figure in the field of Political Science, Government, and International Relations.¹ *Ideological Fixation* is a deeply interdisciplinary contribution, and it is therefore particularly appropriate to have secured reviews from an interdisciplinary panel of experts. Moreover, each of the reviewers has made important interdisciplinary contributions in areas that are related to *Ideological Fixation*.²

All four reviewers find much to appreciate about Gat's impressive book. The reviewers include phrases such as that Gat's "frankness provides a treat for the reader"; his prose is "valiant, erudite" (Lieber); "detailed, subtle and thoughtful, tightly argued, lucid, and balanced" (Barrett); artful and "poignant" (Salmon); and "thorough and balanced" (Sica).

As the reviewers note, *Ideological Fixation* is stunningly wide-reaching, applying a well-reasoned and richly referenced evolutionary-biological-political-sociological-psychological framework to the historical and contemporary problem of "ideological fixation," by which Gat means the closeminded commitment to a set of convictions that is immune to counterevidence and motivates intellectual deafness and animosity toward those who do not share the ideology. Each reviewer comments on the value of Gat's interdisciplinary approach, noting how skillfully his narrative moves between and across several different fields to build a framework for describing and understanding ideological fixation. Each reviewer also notes Gat's intellectual courage in defending what should not be, but often are controversial positions, such as that Western culture bestows many and varied benefits that non-Western cultures cannot (for example, political and social rights for women equal to those granted to men). Another position defended by Gat is that the sexes are not psychologically identical—that is, that there are sex differences, for example, in vocational interest, not attributable entirely to sex-differentiated cultural or social expectations (see, especially, chapter 7). The reviewers all point to the academic risk that Gat runs in stating and defending what should not be, but often is, a controversial position.

Each reviewer provides a brief summary of the material Gat addresses in the book, and each also includes thoughtful and interesting commentary on one or a few issues of specific interest for the field represented by that reviewer. I shall leave it to the reader to enjoy these contributions. In his response, Gat summarizes

¹ See, for example: Azar Gat, *War in Human Civilization* (Oxford University Press, 2008); Gat, *Nations: The Long History and Deep Roots of Political Ethnicity and Nationalism* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

² For example, Louise Barrett, Robin Dunbar, and John Lycett, *Human Evolutionary Psychology* (Princeton University Press, 2002); Robert J. Lieber, *The American Era: Power and Strategy for the 21st Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2005); Catherine Salmon and Donald Symons, *Warrior Lovers: Erotic Fiction, Evolution and Female Sexuality*. (Yale University Press, 2003); Alan Sica, *Max Weber and the New Century* (Routledge, 2017).

in a few hundred words the key ideas that provide the intellectual foundation for *Ideological Fixation*. I genuinely hope that this Roundtable Review might encourage readers of H-Diplo who have not read *Ideological Fixation* to move the book to the top of the stack.

Contributors:

Azar Gat is a Professor at the School of Political Science, Government, and International Relations at Tel Aviv University. His research combines expertise in the fields of history, evolution, anthropology, and social sciences. He is the author of twelve books that deal with the history of military thought, the fundamental questions of war and its causes, the struggles between democratic and non-democratic states, nationalism, and the phenomenon of ideological fixation. His books have been translated into many languages. His *Ideological Fixation: From the Stone Age to Today's Culture Wars* has now been issued in a paperback edition (Oxford University Press, 2024).

Todd K. Shackelford received his PhD in evolutionary psychology in 1997 from the University of Texas at Austin. From 1997–2010, Shackelford was a Professor of Psychology at Florida Atlantic University. Since 2010, he is Professor and Chair of the Department of Psychology at Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan, where he is Co-Director of the Evolutionary Psychology Lab. Shackelford led the founding in 2012 of PhD and MS programs in psychology at Oakland University. In 2016, he was appointed Distinguished Professor by the Oakland University Board of Trustees. Shackelford has published over 350 journal articles, and his work has been cited over 36,000 times. Much of Shackelford's research addresses sexual conflict between men and women, with a focus on men's physical, emotional, and sexual violence against their intimate partners. Since 2006, Shackelford has served as editor of the journal *Evolutionary Psychology* and in 2014 founded the journal *Evolutionary Psychological Science* as Editor-in-Chief. Shackelford is an elected Fellow of the Association for Psychological Science and the American Psychological Association.

Louise Barrett is Professor of Psychology and Canada Research Chair in Cognition, Evolution and Behavior at the University of Lethbridge. She works on both humans and non-human animals. Her research programme centres on how ecology shapes patterns of sociality and life history processes, and 4E approaches (embodied, embedded, enacted, and extended) to cognitive evolution. She is also interested in how culture and biology intersect in human populations, with an emphasis on reproductive decision-making. She is the author of *Beyond the Brain: How Body and Environment Shape Animal and Human Minds* (Princeton University Press, 2011); with Peter Henzi, and Drew Rendall of "Social Brains, Simple Minds: Does Social Complexity Really Require Cognitive Complexity?" *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 362:1480 (2007): 561-575; with Henzi and Robert A. Barton of "Experts in Action: Why We Need an Embodied Social Brain Hypothesis," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B* 377:1844 (2022); and with Gert Stulp and Rebecca Sear of "The Reproductive Ecology of Industrial Societies, Part I: Why Measuring Fertility Matters," *Human Nature* 27 (2016): 422-444.

Robert J. Lieber is Professor Emeritus of Government and International Affairs, Georgetown University. His most recent book is, *Indispensable Nation: American Foreign Policy in a Turbulent World* (Yale University Press, 2022).

Catherine Salmon received her BSc in Biology in 1992 and her PhD in Evolutionary Psychology in 1997 from McMaster University, in Canada. After a number of blissful years as a post-doctoral researcher at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, she fled the frozen north to join the faculty at the University of Redlands in southern California where she is currently a Professor in the Psychology Department and the Director of the Human-Animal Studies program. She is the co-author with Donald Symons of *Warrior Lovers: Erotic Fiction, Evolution and Female Sexuality* (Yale University Press, 2003) and with Katrin Schumann of *The Secret Power of Middle Children* (Penguin, 2012). Her primary research interests include parental investment/sibling conflict, male and female sexuality, particularly as expressed in pornography and other erotic genres, and human-animal interactions. She chaired her university's institutional review board for ten years and was the editor-in-chief of the journal *Evolutionary Behavioral Sciences* from 2017 through 2023. She is a founding member of the Society for Open Inquiry in the Behavioral Science (SOIBS) and a co-editor of the upcoming volume *The Free Inquiry Papers* (American Enterprise Institute, 2024).

Alan Sica is Professor of Sociology and Founding Director, Social Thought Program at Pennsylvania State University. Among other books, he is the author of *Weber, Irrationality, and Social Order* (University of California Press, 2018), *Max Weber: A Comprehensive Bibliography* (Routledge, 2017), *Max Weber and the New Century* (Routledge, 2017), and *Book Matters* (Taylor & Francis, 2017). He served as the editor for *The Routledge International Handbook on Max Weber* (Routledge, 2023) and *Social Thought: From the Enlightenment to the Present* (Taylor & Francis, 2004), and as Coeditor with Stephen Turner for *The Disobedient Generation* (University of Chicago Press, 2005) and with Gary Shapiro for *Hermeneutics* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1984). He previously served as the editor of *History of Sociology*, *Sociological Theory*, and *Contemporary Sociology*.

In *Ideological Fixation: From the Stone Age to Our Modern Culture Wars*, Azar Gat defines an ideology as a normative view of the proper structure and functioning of society, accompanied by an understanding and interpretation of the facts of the world that can be used as a guide, an instruction manual or road map, for bringing this vision of society into being (71). In principle, these two components exist independently of each other: there is no inherent connection between how one thinks the world ought to be and an understanding of the way of the world as it is. There can and ought to be a healthy argument over the interpretations of facts, and one can and should be prepared to update one's world view accordingly. In this way, it is possible to remain in touch with the reality that exists independently of one's lived experience, and the roadmap or instruction manual remains effective. In practice, however, one often finds oneself disputing facts about the world, and diverging from others' interpretations, precisely because of these long-held, normative commitments. This is what it means to be ideologically fixated: a rejection of interpretations about the world that go against one's preferences, and the resulting failure to adjust one's world view to incorporate these new facts. As a result, ideas have the potential to drift away from reality, often to one's detriment, given that reality forms a hard test. As Gat notes, the French historian, philosopher and literary critic, Michel Foucault, insisted that AIDS should be viewed as a social construct, but this stance did not prevent him from dying of this disease (18). The tensions and conflicts between one's "normative wishes" and the interpretations of reality form the heart the book, which offers both a survey of ideological fixations past and present and an explanation for why people are prone to becoming fixated.

The subtitle of Gat's book "From the Stone Age to Today's Culture Wars" gave rise to a fear that the book might contain a series of sweeping generalizations and glib summaries, along with some handwaving "just-so" storytelling about likely evolutionary scenarios. These fears were unfounded. On the contrary, the book is detailed, subtle and thoughtful, tightly argued, lucid, and balanced. The best one-word description might be that it is sane. The evolutionary theorising on offer acknowledges that people are a product of both biological and cultural evolution and does not fall into the trap of neglecting the contingencies of history. *Ideological Fixation* ought to be read from the beginning to the end, even though Gat suggests that the first two chapters can be skipped by those who are familiar with the philosophical arguments regarding truth and morality (ix). To do so would be foolish, for they are a treat; Gat masterfully reveals the idea of truth as a spectrum, in the sense that what one regards as true is never complete—one can always thicken the facts by adding more detail—and that people "judge whether or not, or when, such a thickening of the fact is necessary according to the question that interests us" (13).

Just as the inclusion of a specifically gene-culture co-evolutionary approach as part of the explanation for why ideological fixation occurs is welcome, so too is the addition of an evolutionary perspective because it undercuts the notion that today's culture wars reflect some recent shift in human conduct and are somehow unprecedented. An evolutionary perspective makes clear that a tendency toward ideological fixation is the inevitable price that is paid for the benefits conveyed by the possession of certain evolved psychological

propensities, which means that that “stupid” behavior (from a strictly genetic fitness point of view) forms part and parcel of the evolutionary heritage.¹

More specifically, Gat’s argument is that humans are vulnerable to ideological fixation because of the following combination of psychological traits. First, humans possess a unique ability to construct simplified models of a highly complex world. While one might dispute the assertion that a capacity for abstraction and categorization is unique to humans (which, arguably, is what this kind of “model formation” requires), it is true that such models involve going beyond the observable world, and that people also seek causal relations, both of which do seem to be unique to humans. Gat brings this out extremely well in his narrative. Second, humans rely on an evolved capacity for social learning to acquire their respective models of the world. This is because, as simple as they are relative to reality, the models are still too complex to be developed by any single individual alone. As part of this, humans possess what Gat refers to as a “confidence in numbers” or what gene-culture co-evolutionary theorists such as Robert Boyd and Peter Richerson call a “conformity bias” (112).² Finally, humans show “psychological closure” to other perspectives on reality; that is, people find it easy to ignore an opponent’s views. Gat suggests this is a natural means of social bargaining: intransigence is often the most effective means to get what one wants—basically, one should stick to one’s guns, and not give an inch to the opposition.

Although Gat makes quite clear that *Ideological Fixation* is concerned with broader explanatory factors and not the psychological realm alone, the book perhaps missed a trick here. Fleshing out the evolutionary argument by drawing more extensively on the predictions of dual inheritance theory might have allowed him to assess whether these evolutionary explanations accord with what the historical record shows, and thus deepen the explanation of these broader explanatory factors.³ A more constructive reason is that the detailed descriptions of ideological fixations, both classical and modern, are customarily not tied strongly to the underlying psychological and social mechanisms. These aspects of *Ideological Fixation* appear to move in parallel, rather than one actively helping to explain the other. The varied examples of ideological fixations clearly have certain unique features, as well as conformation to a general pattern, and some analysis of whether and why certain mechanisms operate more strongly in one case rather than another would have brought these parallel strands together.

For example, rather than just noting that people have confidence in numbers, as Gat puts it, work on conformity biases (or conformist transmission) has generated some specific predictions about human psychology.⁴ These are (1) that humans will always prefer conformist transmission over vertical (parent to

¹ Peter J. Richerson and Robert Boyd, *Not by Genes Alone: How Culture Transformed Human Evolution* (University of Chicago Press, 2008)

² Robert Boyd and Peter J. Richerson, *Culture and the Evolutionary Process* (University of Chicago Press, 1988); Joseph Henrich, *The Secret of Our Success: How Culture is Driving Human Evolution, Domesticating Our Species, and Making Us Smarter* (Princeton University Press, 2016); Richerson and Boyd, *Not by Genes Alone*;

³ Boyd and Richerson, *Culture and the Evolutionary Process*; Richerson and Boyd, *Not by Genes Alone*.

⁴ Henrich and Boyd, “The Evolution of Conformist Transmission and the Emergence of Between-Group Differences,” *Evolution and Human Behavior* 19:4 (1998): 215-24; Boyd and Richerson, *Culture and the Evolutionary Process*; Richerson and Boyd, *Not by Genes Alone*.

offspring) transmission whenever they have access to a range of cultural models at low cost; and that (2) as the accuracy of information acquired through individual learning decreases, a learner's reliance on conformist transmission will increase. This is because, if individual learning costs more but does not result in any greater accuracy of information acquired, then cheaper forms of social learning become more advantageous because one can acquire the information of equivalent accuracy for less. Consequently, (3) people will thus tend to conform more often when problems are ambiguous, complex, or difficult to solve on one's own; and that (4) as the proportion of models displaying a trait increases, the strength of conformist transmission should increase in a non-linear fashion.

Richerson and Boyd suggest that the findings of classic work in social psychology,⁵ such as the Solomon Asch's experiments on line length,⁶ can be accounted for by their models, and that such experiments serve to make visible the "default settings" of our evolved psychology. That is, as these mechanisms usually work well, and hence "invisibly," in our daily lives, we fail to register them, whereas the odd set-ups of these experiments help make them manifest, and can also reveal the unintended (but inevitable) consequences of acquiring such psychological traits. It might seem that the ideological fixations that Gat discusses, both classic and contemporary, could be profitably assessed in terms of these predictions. Similarly, Richard McElreath and Joe Henrich's work points toward a co-evolutionary reinterpretation of Stanley Milgram's classic work on obedience to authority.⁷ Here, they suggest that participants in Milgram's experiments are best thought of as gullible, rather than obedient.⁸ Their modelling showed that, particularly when information is abstruse or highly specialized, it pays social learners to be gullible (i.e., to simply believe what they were told and act on that basis) because social learners cannot afford to pay the cost of verifying the accuracy of every piece of information they receive. That would require a huge amount of time and energy to gain the requisite amount of knowledge to decide whether what is being told to them is accurate and would thus obviate all the benefits of social learning. If social learning is to work effectively, there must be a mechanism that ensures individuals are ready to believe whatever a credible authority tells or shows them. Again, understanding the conditions under which gullibility is most likely to pay-off might shed additional light on the nature of ideological fixation, and potentially explain why certain forms may be stronger and more persistent than others.

In similar vein, work on "tribal social instincts" might help deepen an understanding of why outside perspectives often can be so easily ignored. Richerson and Henrich argue that that human prosocial instincts reflect the operation of gene-culture co-evolutionary processes that have selected for psychological

⁵ Henrich and Boyd, "The Evolution of Conformist Transmission"; "Boyd and Richerson, *Culture and the Evolutionary Process*; Boyd and Richerson, *Not by Genes Alone*.

⁶ Solomon E. Asch, "Studies of Independence and Conformity: I. A Minority of One against a Unanimous Majority," *Psychological Monographs: General and Applied* 70:9 (1956), 1.

⁷ Richard McElreath and Henrich, "Modelling Cultural Evolution," in Robin Dunbar, Ian MacDonald, and Louise Barrett, eds., *Oxford Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 571-586.

⁸ Stanley Milgram, "Behavioral Study of Obedience," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 67:4 (1963): 371-378.

mechanisms to feel bonded to whomever is a member of one's social group, regardless of genetic kinship.⁹ More specifically, formal modelling has been used to show how cultural evolutionary processes can select for large, cooperative, symbolically marked groups. Symbolic markers (e.g., scarification, tattoos, dialects) signal who is to be trusted and helped, and with whom to share resources and information. Humans are thus equipped with a psychology that both “expects” life to be structured by moral norms (i.e., acceptance and abidance by the norms of the social contract, including punishment for those who transgress) and divided into symbolically marked groups. Importantly, once these symbolic markers are in place, they act to increase both within-group homogeneity and between-group heterogeneity (as different groups will use different forms of symbolic marking).

What is interesting here is how other well established cultural and social learning phenomena—the exchange of peoples and ideas between groups, the incorporation and assimilation of others' traditions and behaviors, the generally porous nature of cultural boundaries—act against the cultural evolutionary forces just described. Yet, despite this assimilation and exchange, existing boundaries between groups (ethnic, religious, or otherwise ideological) remain clear and persistent. This is where the links to psychological closure can be made as the persistence of marked boundaries between groups is argued to be consequence of rapid cultural adaptation. That is, just as people can rapidly adopt new behaviors and customs, they also learn to adapt rapidly to the changes in their particular cultural milieu and take steps to ensure that they retain the ability to operate efficiently within it. As the key to operating efficiently and effectively is to ensure your interactions with others are as smooth and successful as possible, this means preferentially seeking out and interacting with people who know and abide by the same norms and rules.¹⁰

The introduction of new ideas thus acts to ensure that people also continue to cling to the particular cultural values with which they are familiar. Acquiring new customs, behaviors, and beliefs from other groups, in order to suit individual needs and increase success in certain domains, is therefore tempered by the conservative force of interacting selectively with members of one's own group. This has the effect of reinforcing cultural and group boundaries, even as other cultural changes take place. An in-group boundary is therefore dynamic: it continually shifts between the old and established and the new and novel. Rejecting and ignoring other perspectives might, in fact, be an inevitable consequence of being exposed to new ideas, practices, and ways of being, as it forms a means of ensuring one continues to reap many of the benefits of social life.¹⁰ This raises the question of whether ideological fixation represents a healthy process of stabilization that has gone out of control, pushed toward maladaptive behavior by (too?) rapid cultural change in other arenas.

Moving onto to ideas that lie beyond an explicitly evolutionary perspective, the chapter on religious ideologies stands out, because, as in Keith Thomas' classic *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, the transition

⁹ Richerson and Henrich, “Tribal Social Instincts and the Cultural Evolution of Institutions to Solve Collective Action Problems,” *Cliodynamics* 3:1 (2012): 38-80; Henrich and Boyd, “The Evolution of Conformist Transmission and the Emergence of Between-Group Differences,” *Evolution and Human Behavior* 19:4 (1998): 215-241.

¹⁰ Richerson and Boyd, *Not by Genes Alone*; Boyd, Richerson, and Henrich, “Rapid Cultural Adaptation Can Facilitate the Evolution of Large-Scale Cooperation,” *Behavioral Ecology and Sociobiology* 65 (2011): 431-444.

from magical thinking to religious thinking is entirely fascinating (71-113).¹¹ As Gat notes, we should not despise these non-scientific ways of thinking, representing as they do valiant attempts to understand a complex, messy, and often puzzling world. As Thomas's book also makes clear, the transitions between these ideas are similarly messy, complex, and often puzzling, with certain forms of magical thought persisting even as religious ideas were gaining ground (though this is particularly relevant to Gat's discussion, he does not cite it). What really stands out, however, is Gat's mention of the impact of literacy and the written word on the rise of transcendental religion: "Literacy was the quintessential sphere of transcendence," with "the written medium was a stable storage and sphere of communication" which was used to "... put forward a comprehensive doctrine, manual or code of behavior for individual and communal self-conduct toward the self, others and the cosmos...Elaborated and codified through the medium of writing, the new systems took the form of full blown ideologies" (83).

Such passages triggered thoughts of the "Gutenberg parenthesis," a provocative idea put forward and developed by Lars Ole Sauerberg and Tom Pettitt of the University of Southern Denmark.¹² The Gutenberg parenthesis represents the five hundred years between the invention of the printing press and the rise of the internet, in which the printed word and the bound text dominated human culture in the West. The provocation is that this period is just a short-term blip in how humans communicate and exchange ideas.¹³ Prior to the invention of moveable type, communication was generally low-tech, face-to-face, largely oral but with some use of text. During the parenthesis, we have seen large-scale textual mediation via the printed word. With the invention of the internet, we are now engaged in various forms of electronic, digitally mediated communication, which moves society away from static, stable, closed texts, which are the property of a single author, toward a form of secondary orality,¹⁴ with texts that are more fluid, less stable, and reflect the input of multiple individuals. As Tom Pettitt has said, "if one wishes to know how we will communicate in the future, the answer seems to be: like a medieval peasant."¹⁵

The central idea is that the ways in which thoughts are shaped by the technological means of communication, and vice versa (i.e., one must be careful to avoid technological determinism), means that as society leaves the parenthesis and enters a new form of cultural mediation, cognition and cultural products will change accordingly. What is said to characterize the parenthesis is the notion of

¹¹ Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971).

¹² Jeff Jarvis, *The Gutenberg Parenthesis: The Age of Print and Its Lessons for the Age of the Internet* (Bloomsbury, 2023); Tom Pettitt, "The Gutenberg Parenthesis" YouTube video, posted 21 April 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O-zzkgKOBk&tab_channel=MITComparativeMediaStudies%2FWriting.

¹³ The word "parenthesis" is used by direct analogy with a written sentence, where a distinct thought is enclosed, and remains separate from the main subject of the sentence, but which nevertheless has an influence upon it. That is, nothing pejorative is meant by the notion that it is a blip or anomaly in a longer-term pattern. The authors also make clear that the parenthesis is not confined to a specific time period per se, as cultures can enter the parenthesis at different times and at different rates.

¹⁴ Walter J. Ong and John Hartley, *Orality and Literacy* (Routledge, 2013).

¹⁵ Pettitt, "The Gutenberg Parenthesis."

containment—the way in which cultural products have become isolated, enclosed, and autonomous.¹⁶ Words were structured into blocks of text that were printed on a page, pages were bound and confined within covers, giving rise to the “individual work” that belonged to the person who created it. Such a work is considered to be complete—to have a clear beginning, middle, and end. Pettitt notes that similar kinds of containment were also seen in other media during the same period: plays were confined to stages, enclosed in theatres, music was printed behind bars, paintings were given frames.¹⁷

Before and after the parenthesis, words are interfered with to a much greater extent, stories are seen as incomplete, and continually open to revision, they are not reproduced faithfully, and knowledge production as a whole is much more collaborative and collective. The reason for raising this idea is that it speaks directly to notions of psychological closure, suggesting that that beyond the rise of religious ideologies, the printed text may have had a broader and more widespread effect on ideological fixation. Taking on board the idea of the parenthesis suggests that specific aspects of our material culture may have shaped the degree of psychological closure so often displayed, amplifying the tendencies produced by previous eras of gene-culture evolution. Should this be the case, it seems worth considering how a move (back) toward a less contained culture may have implications both for how ideologies arise, and whether this increases or decreases our vulnerability to ideological fixation.

¹⁶ Pettitt, “The Gutenberg Parenthesis.”

¹⁷ Pettitt, “The Gutenberg Parenthesis.”

This is an unusual book by an extraordinary thinker and author. In *Ideological Fixation: From the Stone Age to Our Modern Culture Wars*, Azar Gat draws on a wealth of knowledge about philosophy and evolutionary psychology to analyze what he describes as a venomous ideological civil war in the US and the zeal of participants who often display an intensity of views and beliefs that are more commonly associated with religious belief than everyday politics. In doing so, he reaches back into the mists of time in an effort to capture the deepest human proclivities from the Stone Age, the rise of civilization, and even the philosophical and sociological origins of liberal democracy. Gat disarmingly notes that ideology, along with its various biases and dogmatic rigidities (in other words, ideological fixation), has been subject to exhaustive study during the past century. Thus, his aim, unlike that of Karl Marx, is not to change this deep-seated human characteristic, but to understand it.

Writing in the first person, which he does throughout the book, Gat expresses his own sense of wonderment at the way people enclose themselves within their ideological frames and consequently find themselves, “entirely deaf...to arguments and claims about the world that come from the opposite camp, no matter how valid they might be” (vii). He is also commendably frank in telling the reader that, “...this book was undertaken with an acute awareness of how much such a venture was a forlorn hope” (296). Gat notes that he began working on the book before 2016, before President Donald Trump’s first campaign and surprising presidential victory in November 2016. Nonetheless, viewed from the vantage point of the current political climate and Trump’s current campaign to gain a second term as president, the book does not feel out of date.

In seeking to understand the deepest human proclivities, Gat takes the reader through long, erudite but dense chapters on the meanings of truth and of morality, which are the subjects of his first two chapters. Here, as elsewhere in the book, he makes it a point to cite leading philosophers, ethicists, evolutionary psychologists, and political theorists. This breadth and depth of thinking and contextualization is a hallmark of his writing and was especially evident in his magisterial work, *War in Human Civilization*.¹ In that book, Gat devoted 150 pages to warfare in the initial two million years of human existence, then turned to agriculture in its relationship to civilization and war. Only after 440 pages, just beyond the halfway point of the work, does he then turn to the subject of modernity and war.

The drawback of this kind of elaborate inquiry is that for those who are not otherwise absorbed with these questions of analytic philosophy, the initial part of the book may not hold their attention. Indeed, the author himself tells readers that those who are less interested in such philosophical matters are welcome to bypass the first two chapters in order to skip ahead to the heart of the book with its treatment of classical ideologies, current debates, and ideological fixations pervading the liberal democracies. This reviewer finds himself among those whose appreciation of this book lies in those substantive chapters.

¹ Azar Gat, *War in Human Civilization* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

Gat's treatment of the major contending philosophical and political contenders of modernity is more accessible and includes liberalism, socialism, and fascism and references to a wide range of philosophical figures. These include John Locke, Adam Smith, Plato and Aristotle, Hegel, Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, John Stuart Mill, Alexis de Tocqueville, Jeremy Bentham, Milovan Djilas, Jean-Paul Sartre, Raymond Aron, Friedrich Hayek, and others. But a particular virtue of Gat's work is his repeated insistence on connecting grand themes of politics and philosophy with direct historical and political realities. He does not mince words in conveying the contingency of outcomes. He observes that, "If not for the existence of the United States, the liberal democratic world would most likely have lost the great struggles of the twentieth century" (144). In elaborating on this point, he does not shy away from expressing the view without the intervention of the US in both world wars, Germany would have likely defeated Britain and France.

This willingness to grapple with the relationship between broader schools of thought and beliefs, on the one hand, and consequential and contingent realities, on the other, is evident throughout the book and is a real strength of the author's approach. It also means that the book wades into sometimes ferocious arguments about politics and society and takes unpopular positions which are mostly anchored in empirical realities.

Notably, Gat is unsparing in his critique of the pervasive tendency to blame the US and other western liberal societies for the ills of the rest of the world and the accompanying bifurcation of humanity into oppressors and the oppressed, and colonizers and the colonized, with the consequence that the West is by definition at fault. The others, its alleged victims, are categorized as virtuous.

Gat gets to the heart of this bifurcation by refuting the assumptions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Herbert Marcuse and the Frankfurt school,² Michel Foucault, Sigmund Freud, Margaret Mead, and assorted post-modernists.³ A core part of Gat's challenge is to the belief in a lost Eden and the idealization of pre-modern society which by definition had been debased and corrupted by modern Western society and liberal capitalism. Here Gat is especially effective in pointing to evidence that primitive and traditional societies were commonly characterized by violence and war. In a deft turn of phrase, he also makes the point that the reason that Indian nationalist Mahatma Gandhi was successful in opposing British colonial rule of India was that Britain itself was liberal and thus unlikely to employ the most draconian methods to suppress Indian independence (173).

In taking on the critics of the West such as Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Judith Butler, and Noam Chomsky and their embrace of the mystique of third world societies,⁴ Gat writes that Chomsky, for example, has "sanctified the indigenous" and "has turned a blind eye to what 'indigenous' all too often meant in terms of human miseries, oppression, and horrors in traditional societies." Here Gat also pinpoints "resistance to

² Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Beacon, 1964).

³ Margaret Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa* (New York: Blue Ribbon, 1928); Sigmund Freud, "Civilization and Its Discontents" (1930), in *The Complete Psychological Works*, vol. 18, 101-104, and vol. 21, 108-176;

⁴ He cites, for example, Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (Grove, 2004); and Edward Said's *Orientalism* (Pantheon, 1978);

and denial of the evidence for mass killing and genocide” (184).⁵ In this analysis, Gat points out that non-European empires were typically no better than Western ones and that Ottoman rule of the Middle East and Africa as well as early African empires in Mali, Ghana, Uganda, Congo, and Ethiopia all carried out campaigns of war, looting, conquest, and enslavement (180). And to further distance himself from the above authors, Gat approvingly quotes Middle East scholar and historian Bernard Lewis, who was an authoritative critic of Edward Said, and who emphasized that the “Islamic world had not experienced transformation akin to the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment, which paved the way for modernity in the West...” (188).⁶

Gat does not shy away from a number of deeply controversial intellectual disagreements and tends to set out his own positions with directness and clarity. For example, he emphatically agrees with Steven Pinker in the discussion of cognitive and behavioral differences between men and women.⁷ In addition, he takes issue with Thomas Piketty’s fashionable analysis of Western imperialist exploitation, pointing out that the value extracted from colonies was relatively negligible when contrasted with the size of the economies of the colonial powers (212).⁸ Gat also criticizes Piketty’s work for largely ignoring the benefits provided by imperial powers in terms of public administration and legal systems, adding that these replaced corrupt institutions in colonized countries such as India.

These observations are part of Gat’s rallying to the defense of otherwise much maligned liberal democracies and market economies. In doing so, he emphasizes the importance of clear thinking including factual rather than normative aspects of ideology and he praises Pinker for writing that

The humanities have yet to recover from the disaster of postmodernism, with its defiant obscurantism, self-refuting relativism, and suffocating political correctness. Many of its luminaries—Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Lacan, Derrida, the Critical Theorists—are morose cultural pessimists who declare that modernity is odious, all statements are paradoxical, works of art are tools of oppression, liberal democracy is the same as fascism, and Western civilization is circling the drain.(207)⁹

The intolerant character of this postmodernist ethos is palpable in the demand, cited by Gat, of 638 academics who signed onto a letter calling for the dismissal of Pinker from “both our list of distinguished academic fellows and our list of media experts” (207).¹⁰ In contrast, Gat reminds us that, “all of the economically developed countries in today’s world are liberal democracies. They also do not fight each

⁵ See, for example, “The Legitimacy of Violence as a Political Act?: Noam Chomsky Debates with Hannah Arendt, Susan Sontag, et al, December 15, 1967,” Chomsky.Info, <https://chomsky.info/19671215/>.

⁶ See Bernard Lewis, “The Roots of Muslim Rage,” *Atlantic Monthly*, September 1990, 47–60; Lewis, *The Jews of Islam* (Princeton University Press, 1984); Lewis, *Islam and the West* (Oxford University Press, 1993); Said, *Orientalism*.

⁷ Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (Penguin, 2002).

⁸ Thomas Piketty, *Capital and Ideology* (Harvard University Press, 2019).

⁹ Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (Viking, 2018), 492.

¹⁰ Open Letter to the Linguistic Society of America, 6 July 2020, https://docs.google.com/document/d/17ZqWl5grm_F5Kn_oOarY9Q2jlOnk200PvhM5e3isPvY/preview.

other or experience civil wars” (236). When it comes to the claim about liberal democracies, one might quibble that Singapore has attained the status of an economically developed society, though the broader point remains valid.

Not surprisingly, Gat also writes about the gender wars. Here he sides with Jonathan Gottschall who criticizes the pervasive notion in the humanities that gender is an arbitrary social construct (276).¹¹ For Gottschall and Gat, gender matters. Some differences between the sexes really are due to nature while others are due to nurture, but Gat argues that “biology is not destiny and changes in social conditions and practices have a huge effect” (245).

Azar Gat’s frankness provides a treat for the reader in his willingness to stake out and defend positions that would earn him censure in more than a few academic institutions. But these positions are based on his interpretation of the facts, as are his observations about numerous sensitive topics. Among these, he writes that “...the radical view of the world that has variably affected left-liberalism is generally twisted and represents a far-reaching departure from reality” (289); that the great majority of the murders of Black Americans are committed by Black assailants (192); that national identities are not contrived nor illegitimate fictions; and that insistence on “social justice” is part of a shift in American progressivism “... that has been increasingly turning into a zealous, intolerant, and sometime fanatical sect” (290).

Gat approvingly cites the judgment of philosopher John Stuart Mill that a party of order and stability and one of progress and reform are essential to healthy political life, and then notes that the US culture wars push each party to extremes (294).¹² He concludes:

Reason is still our signature tool for coping with a complex reality, yet it is easily subverted by overconfidence, cognitive closure, and biases...After all, the message of this book is that the first (and often last), instinctive question that people ask themselves is whether the person to whose views they are exposed belongs to our or the opposite camp (308-309).

In writing this book, Azar Gat has made a valiant, erudite effort to come to grips with the phenomena of political and intellectual polarization. In his specific and admirably unvarnished observations about realms of competitive discourse he has made valuable contributions to our understanding of these ideas. While shedding light on the problem, the book neither solves nor claims to solve the underlying problem of ideological fixation.

¹¹ Jonathan Gottschall and David Sloan Wilson, “Introduction,” in Gottschall and Wilson, eds., *The Literary Animal Evolution and the Nature of Narrative* (Northwestern University Press, 2005), xix-xx.

¹² John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (Longman, Roberts, & Green, 1859).

In *Ideological Fixation: From the Stone Age to Today's Culture Wars*, Azar Gat reaches back through time, incorporating insights from evolutionary psychology about human nature to understand the roots of ideological phenomenon and why humans are inclined toward this kind of thinking. He explains that ideology is a necessary feature of human nature because it provides a framework for understanding the world. In this sense, it is part of the human condition. And as such, ideology can easily become a tool of warfare, whether politically motivated or otherwise. *Ideological Fixation* is a book that considers the roots of the problem of ideological fixation as well as the role it is playing in the current culture wars dividing the United States and other Western countries.

In the first two chapters, Gat provides the basics for understanding the role of two important questions in shaping ideology: what is the truth, or reality (3-27), and what is morally right (28-70)? Truth and morality are the basis of ideology, and for how people both see the world and want it to be. These simplified cognitive models of how one views the world, and how one thinks it ought to be, are reinforced by social groups, often in an echo chamber where other perspectives or world views are not heard. When one encounters conflicting interpretations of the world, rather than consider this new perspective, the natural inclination is to see that perspective as evil, as it challenges what one thinks the world is or ought to be. For many, ideology identifies what causes are just and gives meaning to their lives; hence the secular religion approach to studying political ideology or movements.¹

Humans are social animals and we have a wide range of adaptations that are designed to allow us to successfully navigate our social world,² from acquiring and keeping mates,³ to navigating kin relationships,⁴ to cheater detection,⁵ and to social conflict and cooperation.⁶ It should not be surprising that when conflict arises between an individual's (or their group's) ideology and the ideology—and corresponding interpretation of reality—of another individual or group, individuals can ignore the obvious truth and

¹ For example, Emilio Gentile, *Politics as Religion* (Princeton University Press, 2020).

² Herbert Gintis, "Strong Reciprocity and Human Sociality," *Journal of Theoretical Biology* 206:2 (2000): 169-179; Michael Tomasello, "The Adaptive Origins of Uniquely Human Sociality," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B* 375:1803 (2020).

³ David M. Buss and David P. Schmitt, "Sexual Strategies Theory: An Evolutionary Perspective on Human Mating," *Psychological Review* 100:2 (1993): 204-232. Buss, "Human Mate Guarding," *Neuroendocrinology Letters* 23: 4 (2002): 23-29; Todd Shackelford, Aaron Goetz, and Buss, "Mate Retention in Marriage: Further Evidence of the Reliability of the Mate Retention Inventory," *Personality and Individual Differences* 39:2 (2005): 415-425.

⁴ Catherine Salmon and Shackelford, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Evolutionary Family Psychology* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁵ Leda Cosmides, John Tooby, Laurence Fiddick, and Gregory Bryant, "Detecting Cheaters," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 9:11 (2005): 505-506.

⁶ Tooby and Cosmides, "Human Cooperation Shows the Distinctive Signatures of Adaptations to Small-Scale Social Life," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 39 (2016), DOI:10.1017/S0140525X15000266; Tooby and Cosmides, "Groups in Mind: The Coalitional Roots of War and Morality," in Henrik Høgh-Olesen, ed., *Human Morality and Sociality: Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives* (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2010), 191-234.

distort its meaning in the service of their ideological narrative or normative commitment. They are unable to accept the other side's claims about reality no matter how valid the evidence. Hence the modern-day "fake news" and misinformation claims.

In the second part of the book, Gat discusses historical examples of ideological fixation. Religious ideology is the focus in chapter 3, while chapter 4 covers the more modern secular religions of liberalism, socialism, and fascism and their narrative appeal to their adherents (114-154). Most early ideology was religious in nature. Every religion provides a framework for understanding the world and a blueprint for how society and people should function in it. This narrative shapes their respective interpretation of right and wrong. It also makes it easy to demonize others who see the world differently as not just wrong, but evil (71-113).

The third section of *Ideological Fixation* examines manifestations of ideological fixation that are familiar in the Western world, including guilt over the West's history of imperialism and colonialism (155-213), how nature and nurture approaches shape arguments over the state and nationhood (214-238), and gender and sexual behavior (239-277). This section is the most poignant for those who are concerned with the current levels of conflict and deep divides in the US and the world. Gat opens this section with a discussion of the relationship of the West to the rest of the world and its role in industrialization, modernization, and the rise of liberal norms and liberal democracies. He refutes the claim that Western capitalism is the root of all evil, seeking to exploit and victimize less developed populations, arguing that the perspective that views these undeveloped lands as full of "native innocence" is naïve (176).

Gat reveals the ways in which members of the radical left (he also includes examples of this behavior on the part of the radical right) seek to constrain the free speech of those who challenge their narratives, such as Steven Pinker, whom radical progressives attempted to cancel via an open letter campaign against his book on the success of the enlightenment, reason, science, humanism and progress,⁷ and Bruce Gilley, who was attacked for his analysis suggesting there were benefits as well as negatives to western colonialism from the perspective of the colonized (207-209).⁸ Others have also pointed out that historic attempts to prevent challenges to ideological narratives have been misguided, often dangerous, and that this new Lysenkoism is anti-truth.⁹ Gat discusses the current divide in the US between those who prioritize the old style liberal value of freedom versus those whose focus is on equality and victimhood, and a lack of equality that is due to past wrongs, which Gat posits absolves people of personal responsibility and agency in a way that

⁷ Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (Viking, 2018); Pinker, "Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress," *Revista Española de Investigaciones Sociológicas* 170:170 (2020): 163-167.

⁸ Bruce Gilley, "The Case for Colonialism" *Third World Quarterly* (2017): 1-17, doi.10.1080/01436597.2017.1369037.

⁹ Salmon and Lee Jussim, "Lysenkoism Then and Now: A Cautionary Tale of Censorious Social Norms," in *The Free Inquiry Papers* (American Enterprise Institute, forthcoming, 2024). Trofim Denisovich Lysenko was a Soviet agronomist and scientist who as director of the Institute of Genetics of the Soviet Academy of Sciences suppressed and discredited dissenting opinions, imprisoned his critics, and indoctrinated the Soviet government and its people with his pseudoscientific ideas. His ideas and practices contributed to famines that killed millions in the Soviet Union and China.

impedes future success. Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt also discuss the effects of this kind of thinking and how it can undermine the goals it is trying to achieve.¹⁰

The chapter on gender and sexual behavior examines the two facets of ideology, that it is a worldview and a roadmap for normative change, with regard to the many versions of feminism. The debate over the relative roles of nature and nurture, and their contribution to sex similarities and differences, is never-ending and often driven by ideological goals rather than an attempt to understand what shapes the psychology and the current behavioral reality. Gat artfully exposes the paradox lamenting “How fairly well-known scholarly findings on the differences between the sexes have had so little impact on the ideological discourse and the fervor of the public debate” (240).

It is evident that personal biases can blind people from data that does not agree with their ideological narrative. Research findings suggest that individuals seek evidence that supports their ideology and impose higher standards for evidence that threatens their belief systems.¹¹ Yet by preventing a clear understanding of the forces that shape the problem itself, the ideological fixation in parts of feminism might prevent the development of solutions to the problems feminists want to solve. Camille Paglia discussed this issue with regard to rape, which Gat also examines.¹² Gat also analyzes the problem of the feminist perspective of seeing no sex differences in the face of data that clearly demonstrates the role of nature in shaping men and women. He discusses the research on occupational preferences and cognitive skills including that from countries which are held up as egalitarian and where one might expect less sex segregation by occupation if there were no inherent preferences.¹³

Research shows, however, that in the highly egalitarian Scandinavian countries, there are clear differences: women more than men choose occupations that involve human interactions, while men are more likely to choose occupations that deal with things.¹⁴ When given the freedom to choose in egalitarian societies with high levels of social support, people are free to choose to do what they find most inherently appealing.

¹⁰ Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas are Setting up a Generation for Failure* (Penguin, 2019).

¹¹ R. DuBroff, “Confirmation Bias, Conflicts of Interest and Cholesterol Guidance: Can We Trust Expert Opinions?” *QJM: An International Journal of Medicine* 11:10 (October 2018): 687–689, <https://doi.org/10.1093/qjmed/hcx213>. Sean T. Stevens, Jussim, Stephanie M. Anglin, and Nathan Honeycutt, “Direct and Indirect Influences of Political Ideology on Perceptions of Scientific Findings,” in Bastiaan Rutjens and Mark Brandt, eds., *Belief Systems and the Perception of Reality* (Routledge, 2018), 115–133.

¹² Camille Paglia, *Free Women, Free Men: Sex, Gender, Feminism* (Vintage, 2018).

¹³ Kingsley R. Browne, “Evolved Sex Differences and Occupational Segregation,” *Journal of Organizational Behavior: The International Journal of Industrial, Occupational and Organizational Psychology and Behavior* 27:2 (2006): 143–162. Richard A. Lippa, “Sex Differences in Personality Traits and Gender-related Occupational Preferences across 53 Nations: Testing Evolutionary and Social-environmental Theories,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 39:3 (2010): 619–636.

¹⁴ Kingsley R. Browne, “Evolved Sex Differences and Occupational Segregation,” *Journal of Organizational Behavior: The International Journal of Industrial, Occupational and Organizational Psychology and Behavior* 27:2 (2006): 143–162; Lippa, “Sex Differences in Personality Traits and Gender-Related Occupational Preferences Across 53 Nations”; Susan Pinker, *The Sexual Paradox: Men, Women and the Real Gender Gap* (Simon & Schuster, 2009).

Interestingly, studies of Samoan fa'afafine (transgender feminine presenting androphilic males) suggest that they have female-typical occupational preferences while studies of androphilic men (both cisgender and transgender) who are known as muxes, from the Istmo region of Oaxaca, Mexico suggest that while both types of muxes show sex-atypical occupational preferences compared to cisgender heterosexual men, the transgender muxes show higher female-typical occupational preferences than women while the cisgender muxes showed no difference from women.¹⁵ The evidence does seem to suggest, as the late famous anthropologist Don Symons told me back when I was a graduate student studying male and female sexually explicit media, that boys and girls are different, whether that fact is convenient or not.

In the last section, Gat questions whether there is anything that can be done to change these current battlefields and ease the ideological fixations that make these conflicts intractable. Gat devotes a chapter on the polarization between progressives and conservatives in the United States (278-295), and both chapters illustrate how difficult compromise is likely to be when “sacred principles” and self-interest are involved (295). Scott Atran has highlighted the role of sacred principles in intractable conflicts and how challenging it is to resolve conflicts grounded in ideological narratives,¹⁶ though David Pinsof and Martie Haselton have recently suggested a lesser role for abstract moral values and more of a role for ad hoc narratives that contain self-serving, incompatible moral principles. If they are correct, while this pathway is not entirely clear, it would imply a different approach to solving some of these political and cultural problems.¹⁷

One of Gat's examples, the wealth gap, is an interesting choice as the income, social class, power gap and overproduction of elites has been associated with the decline of civilizations (281-285). Peter Turchin's structural-demographic analysis of American history highlights the role played by elites (and elite overproduction) as an increasing number of aspiring elites compete for the limited supply of positions of power. This increased competition leads to the formation and intensification of rival networks of allies, or political coalitions, which vie for the rewards of state service. The result is a divided elite class which is characterized by substantial rivalries and increasingly isolated factions who can no longer work together. This sounds like the conflicts that Gat reviews in *Ideological Fixation*. Turchin details how, in the present and the future, as it has in the past, this can lead to sociopolitical instability as the population at large picks a faction or seeks a new system entirely, as during the French Revolution. Elite expansion, which is seen in increasing numbers of elites and their increasing incomes, is one of the most reliable predictors of state collapse and high political instability.¹⁸

¹⁵ Francisco R. Gómez Jiménez, Lucas Court, and Paul L. Vasey. “Occupational Preferences and Recalled Childhood Sex-Atypical Behavior among Istmo Zapotec Men, Women, And Muxes,” *Human Nature* 32:4 (2021): 729-747; Scott W. Semenyina and Paul L. Vasey. “The Relationship Between Adult Occupational Preferences and Childhood Gender Nonconformity among Samoan Women, Men, and fa'afafine,” *Human Nature* 27:3 (2016): 283-295.

¹⁶ Scott Atran and Hammad Sheikh. “Dangerous Terrorists as Devoted Actors,” in Lisa L. M. Welling, Shackelford, and Virgil Zeigler-Hill, eds., *Evolutionary Perspectives on Social Psychology* (Springer, 2015): 401-416.

¹⁷ David Pinsof and Martie Haselton, “The Political Divide over Same-Sex Marriage: Mating Strategies in Conflict?” *Psychological Science* 27:4 (2016): 435-442.

¹⁸ Peter Turchin, *End Times: Elites, Counter-Elites, and the Path of Political Disintegration* (Penguin, 2023); Turchin, *Ages of Discord: A Structural Demographic Analysis of American History* (Beresta Books, 2016).

Though one might assume that the elite intellectual class is less susceptible to biases and ideological fixation, Gat reveals that they are more so. Open inquiry and critical thinking ought to be the backbone of this group but there is a surprising lack of skepticism, a certain narcissistic hubris, and a lack of awareness of their biases that in turn fosters a demonization of anyone who disagrees. This is particularly a matter of concern within academe, where ideas are supposed to be challenged and questioned. Gat quotes George Orwell's statement that, "There are some things so absurd that only an intellectual could believe them, no ordinary man could be such a fool" (305). In line with Turchin's concerns, criticism of the biases of the elites is growing in the population at large, which in turn builds a culture that distrusts the elite class and their claims. Gat essentializes an openness to ideas, intellectual curiosity, and a willingness to be self-critical as essential to avoiding the pitfalls of ideological fixation. The caveat is that many people are deeply emotionally attached to their narratives and their social circles, and have little incentive to change. The modern world of partisan media outlets and social media accentuates social tribalism so that many people are only exposed to like-minded people. There was a time when those who are trained in the scientific method might have embodied an openness to ideas and intellectual curiosity and the humility to avoid fixation, but many of them have also been caught up in these conflicts. *Ideological Fixation* does a great job of explaining why.

Political scientists tend to evade introspection of themselves or others while plying their trade, instead favoring polls or other de-subjectified indicators for analytic purposes. They leave the internal workings of consciousness to psychologists and philosophers, preferring statistically arrangeable data of faceless opinions, free of the “messy” human dimensions that are otherwise attached to them.¹ For the most part they would not, for instance, have asked Sergeant Alvin York what motivated him to behave in such an irrational and risky manner when he gunned down and captured as many as 130 German soldiers in October 1918. Instead, they might examine the troops proximate to York’s heroics on Hill 223 by means of standard categories, like ethnicity, occupations, points of origin, and educational attainment. (In York’s case: Scotch-Irish and English; farming, logging, blacksmithing; Fentress County, Tennessee, nine months of schooling).² Or they might compare the larger strategies of the combatants in an effort to learn how a small squad of Americans could capture so many of the enemy while silencing numerous machine gun nests.

Unlike historians, political scientists would not have the disciplinary training to ask Sgt. York anything, even if he might privately study his diary and autobiography “for context.” Instead, they would tend to position York in his unit, explaining the meaning of York’s famous exploits as part of a macro-political event, and not as reflecting a unique individual’s uncanny behavior while under merciless fire from 35 German machine guns. However, York’s subsequent public persona as the prototypical American—frontier woodsman, devout Christian, dedicated family man, altruist who refused to commodify or “monetize” his heroism—are intriguing given York’s ideological role in preparing the US public for World War II. York did this despite his frank statement that World War I was a great waste of life and resources. One can appreciate the extraordinary irony that typified York’s life: he was a devout fundamentalist Christian who tried hard to avoid military service on religious grounds but was drafted into World War I and became the unequalled US hero of the war, once wisely observing that “Life’s tol’ably queer.”³ After returning home, York bemoaned the pointlessness of a war which had killed about ten million soldiers and nine million civilians. Sgt. York (the man and the Oscar-winning movie, which became virtually interchangeable) represented the actuality of trench warfare about as adequately as today’s Hollywood romantic comedies record how real relationships operate.⁴

If one’s goal as a scholar is to explain the operation of ideological distortions upon political life and thought, then somewhere in any comprehensive catalogue of reasons there must be a way to deal with those political actors (including soldiers like Sgt. York), who carry out extraordinary acts that seem to fly high

¹ One notable example is the approach of Robert Jervis and others. See, among many others, Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton University Press, 1976), Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (Princeton University Press, 1998), Rose McDermott, *Risk-Taking in International Politics: Prospect Theory in American Foreign Policy* (University of Michigan Press, 2011); James W. Davis, ed., *Psychology, Strategy and Conflict: Perceptions of Insecurity in International Relations* (Routledge, 2013).

² Alvin C. York, *His Own Life Story and War Diary*, ed. Tom Skeyhill (Doubleday, Doran, & Company, 1930), <https://ia801407.us.archive.org/21/items/in.ernet.dli.2015.58831/2015.58831.His-Own-Life-Story-And-War-Diary.pdf>.

³ York, *His Own Life Story*, 146.

⁴ *Sargent York*, directed by Howard Hawks (Warner, 1941).

above the ideological terrain, in a zone of their own making that standard analysis misses. Here, Azar Gat's new book can be of use.

Gat is a political scientist of note, and an expert on theories of warfare,⁵ whose work is attuned to both the psychological and sociological dimensions of his topic. His *Ideological Fixation* covers a great deal of contemporary cultural terrain by means of restrained rhetoric, scrupulous attention to balance, and a wry humanity that does not lack humor. This major in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), pokes fun at the lengths to which official organizations now will go in maintaining the standards of ideologically inspired speech and behavior. He writes, "A new order issued by the Israeli Armed Forces several years ago: 'Any soldier was allowed to grow a beard, provided he (or she) informs their commander beforehand'" (273). Like so many intellectuals who have preceded him,⁶ Gat works to analyze the major aspects of social life, both micro and macro, in order to produce scholarship that rises above the partisan dynamics that inspire and control ideological expressiveness.

Gat's aim is to remove from his studies the self-limiting constraints of ideologized thought so that a more or less objective view of these interesting phenomena becomes perceivable (4-6.) He notes that few of his predecessors have managed this feat (11-13). This accounts in part for his gingerly treading through the proverbial minefield laid by today's competing ideological camps, each of whom wishing to dominate their respective zones of concern. He wonders why this is the case, especially in today's world where so much untainted information is available that should, properly applied, relieve victims of distorted thinking of their debility. This same puzzle, of course, perplexed Voltaire and his colleagues during the Enlightenment, and has never stopped fascinating those who think and write for a living rather than participating each day in the unforgiving market of capitalist accumulation and socio-political domination.

French Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte converted the term "ideologues" into a derogation when he applied it to a well-known group of *philosophes* with whom he shared an ambivalent relationship, initially supporting some of their proposed social and educational programs, but later violently rejecting their refusal to support his monarchical desires.⁷ The French Minister of Foreign Affairs Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand recalled hearing him in 1808 warning "the Prussians against the *Idéologues*...They are dreamers and dangerous dreamers: they are all disguised materialists and not too disguised....Ideologues destroy all illusions, and the age of illusions is for individuals as for peoples the age of happiness."⁸ He elaborated in December, 1812 when addressing the Council of State: "We must lay the blame for the ills that our fair France has suffered

⁵ Gat's 900 page *A History of Military Thought: From the Enlightenment to the Cold War* (Oxford University Press, 2012) is, for instance, one of the required textbooks for the Master of Military Science (MMS) degree at School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS), Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

⁶ Raymond Aron, *Power, Modernity, and Sociology: Selected Sociological Writings*, edited by Dominique Schapper; new essays translated by Peter Morris (Gower, 1988); Edward Shils, *Center and Periphery: Essays in Macrosociology* (University of Chicago Press, 1975).

⁷ Philip Dwyer, *Napoleon: The Path to Power* (Yale University Press, 2008), 476-477; Andrew Roberts, *Napoleon: A Life* (New York: Viking, 2014), 306-307.

⁸ Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand, *Mémoires* 5 vols., (Paris, 1891), I:452, quoted in Emmet Kennedy, "'Ideology' from Destutt de Tracy to Marx," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 40:3 (July-September 1979): 353-368, at 359.

on ideology, that shadowy metaphysics which subtly searches for first causes on which to base the legislation of peoples, rather than making use of laws known to the human heart and of the lessons of history.”⁹ His damning sentiments have been repeatedly recalled because the adversarial relationship between enlightened rationality and insistent authoritarianism is one of the fundamental components of ideology as a lived political experience. “Thus ‘ideology,’ for Napoleon, came to mean visionary speculation in contrast to the realities of statecraft,” writes Emmett Kennedy, “That ideologists [e.g., Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès] could be bought with estates and senatorships only proved the doctrine’s inanity...ideology was for Napoleon what metaphysics was for [Destutt de] Tracy.”¹⁰

Destutt de Tracy is credited with inventing “ideology” as a philosophical term, but, as Thomas Jefferson explained to John Adams, the meaning Tracy attached to the term on June 20, 1796 (its first public invocation), bears little relation to Gat’s use.¹¹ Adams asked Jefferson “Pray explain to me this Neological Title! What does it mean? When Bonaparte used it, I was delighted with it, upon the Common Principle of delight in every Thing We cannot understand.”¹² Jefferson responded:

Tracy comprehends, under the word “Ideology,” all the subjects which the French term *Morale*, as the correlative to *Physique*. His works on Logic, government, political economy, and morality, he considers as making up the circle of ideological subjects, or those which are within the scope of the understanding, and not of the senses.¹³

Jefferson was impressed enough with Tracy’s notion that he proposed “ideology” as one of the ten inaugural departments at the University of Virginia.¹⁴ He also translated the fourth part of Tracy’s *Éléments d’idéologie* which explains what ideology meant and how it was to be used in educating a nation’s political elite, going to considerable trouble to have it published in Philadelphia.¹⁵

Destutt de Tracy and his confederate Ideologues, inspired in part by Francis Bacon’s four “idols of the mind,” wished to establish a new institute of higher learning based on Enlightenment, rationalist ideals.¹⁶

⁹ Napoleon Bonaparte, “Rèponse à l’adresse du Conseil d’Etat,” in *Moniteur*, 21 December 1812, 1408, quoted in Kennedy, “Ideology,” 360.

¹⁰ Kennedy, *A Philosopher in the Age of Revolution: Destutt de Tracy and the Origins of “Ideology”* (The American Philosophical Society, 1978), 80ff. See also Hans Barth, *Truth and Ideology*, Frederic Lilge, trans. (University of California Press, 1976), 1-16; George Rudé, *Ideology and Popular Protest* (Pantheon Books, 1980), 15-26. Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès was the President of the French National Convention and primary political theorist of the French Revolution.

¹¹ Kennedy, *A Philosopher in the Age of Revolution*, 46.

¹² John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 16 December 1816, in Lester J. Cappon, ed., *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams* (University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 500-503.

¹³ Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, 11 January 1817, in Cappon, ed., *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 505-507.

¹⁴ Kennedy, *A Philosopher in the Age of Revolution*, 231.

¹⁵ Destutt de Tracy, *A Treatise on Political Economy: To Which is Prefixed a Supplement to a Preceding Work on the Understanding; Or Elements of Ideology; With An Analytical Table and an Introduction on the Faculty of the Will*, Thomas Jefferson, trans. (Joseph Milligan, 1817; reiss. Liberty Fund, 2011).

¹⁶ Douglas Walton, “Francis Bacon: Human Bias and the Four Idols,” *Argumentation* 13:4 (November 1999): 385-389.

Thus, the word itself literally translates from Greek as “science of ideas” or “study of perception.” Even though Napoleon stigmatized the term and its propagators for political reasons, in its original form the dispersal or control of power was not the primary ingredient to its meaning or intentions, which were principally pedagogical. However, in the end, as Napoleon realized, the goal of the proposed “*Institute National: Class/Section of Moral and Political Sciences*” was to perfect the art and science of “regulating society in such a way that man finds there the most help and the least possible annoyance from his own kind.”¹⁷

Ideology—the word, concept, and practice—has been examined over the last two centuries from points of view and predilections that stretch from far left to far right. (The word has become essential even to the literati: David Foster Wallace invoked it five times on one page while reviewing Jerome Frank’s multi-volume Dostoevsky study.¹⁸) A persistent question in the socio-political literature turns around how and why the original French term became almost synonymous with Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’ notion of “false consciousness.”¹⁹ That is, one’s own commitments to political life are typically regarded as “high ideals,” whereas those of one’s opponents are “foolish,” viewed as illusory expressions of an unreal situation. The most creative and prolonged investigation of the concept is Joseph Gabel’s *False Consciousness: An Essay on Reification* in which he, a Marxist-inspired Parisian psychiatrist, demonstrates with data from his practice and others’ that false consciousness can be analytically and behaviorally linked with schizophrenia since delusions do not stop with “sane” political actors, but reach into genuinely disturbed psyches as well.²⁰ Gat frequently refers in his book to the ideological battles going on for years in the United States²¹ as particularly obvious instances of these machinations, though he is well aware that they now occur ubiquitously, especially under the global impetus of “social media.”

Gat refers to Daniel Bell, whose 1960 collection of essays featured a coda entitled “The End of Ideology,” where Bell waxes eloquently:

¹⁷ Tracy, *Memoires Sur la Faculté de Penser* (Paris, 1798), 287, quoted in Kennedy, *A Philosophe in the Age of Revolution*, 47.

¹⁸ David Foster Wallace, “Joseph Frank’s Dostoevsky,” in *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (Little, Brown, 2005), 255-274, at 256.

¹⁹ Among the better-known investigations of this philological phenomenon are, George Lichtheim, “The Concept of Ideology,” *History and Theory*, 4:2 (1965): 164-195; Karl Mannheim, “The Concept of Ideology in Historical Perspective,” in *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, Louis Wirth and Edward Shils, trans. (Harcourt, Brace, 1936), 59-64; Mostafa Rejai, “Ideology” in Philip Wiener, ed., *Dictionary of the History of Ideas: Studies of Selected Pivotal Ideas* (Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1973), 552-559; John Plamenatz, *Ideology* (NewPraeger, 1970, 23-27).

²⁰ Joseph Gabel, *False Consciousness: An Essay on Reification*, Margaret A. Thompson, trans. (Basil Blackwell and Mott, 1975 [1962]; reiss. Harper and Row, 1978). For analysis see Alan Sica, “Gabel’s ‘Micro/Macro’ Bridge: The Schizophrenic Process Writ Large,” *Sociological Theory* 13:1 (March 1995); 66-99; Joseph Gabel, *Ideologies and the Corruption of Thought*, Sica, ed. (Transaction Publishers, 1997).

²¹ A recent example is Tovia Smith, “Three Columbia Deans Ousted for Texts That ‘Touched on . . . Antisemitic Tropes,’” National Public Radio, 8 July 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/07/08/nx-s1-5033234/columbia-deans-texts-antisemitic-jewish-students-protests#:~:text=Three%20deans%20at%20Columbia%20University,return%20to%20their%20prior%20positions>.

Thus one finds, at the end of the Fifties, a disconcerting caesura. In the West, among the intellectuals, the old passions are spent. The new generation, with no meaningful memory of these old debates, and no secure tradition to build upon, finds itself seeking new purposes within a framework of political society that has rejected, intellectually speaking, the old apocalyptic and chiliastic visions. In the search for a “cause,” there is a deep, desperate, almost pathetic anger.²²

Much has been made of Bell’s inaccurate prognosis given events of the later 1960s in the US and Europe.²³ Yet perhaps due to wish-fulfillment, his coda has not been forgotten: is there not a political condition that lies above, beyond, or without ideological distortion? Is this the zone of a sane “total ideology” that Karl Mannheim also sought for relief during the cultural chaos of Weimar Germany in the 1920s?²⁴

Gat’s book offers no such utopian vision or hope, though he does believe that a more accurate understanding of human motivation in the political sphere can be propounded than is typically offered by social scientists. For example, one widely read account of ideology by Edward Shils tidily claimed that:

as compared with other patterns of beliefs, ideologies are relatively highly systematized or integrated around one or a few pre-eminent values, such as salvation, equality, or ethnic purity. They are more insistent on their distinctiveness from, and unconnectedness with, the outlooks, creeds, and other ideologies existing in the same society; they are more resistant to innovations in their beliefs, and deny the existence or the significance of those which do occur.²⁵

This sober functionalist appraisal, persuasive in its time, does not speak to today’s world in a way that satisfies Gat. His understanding of ideological “fixation” is less tethered to the stringent world of elevated intellectualism (e.g., Isaiah Berlin, Raymond Aron, Ralf Dahrendorf, 300-303), and more intimately related to “discourse” as “performed” via globalized electronic chatter, and the political action thereby inspired.²⁶ One could reasonably ask if the very phrase “ideological fixation” is not redundant in that an ideology worthy of the name—at least according to the likes of Shils or Bell—is so all-consuming that it “fixates” its followers by definition. Anything less would not really count as an authentic ideology, or might be termed “ideology lite,” to borrow a beer marketing ploy.

²² Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (Free Press, 1960), 374.

²³ Howard Brick, *Daniel Bell and the Decline of Intellectual Radicalism: Social Theory and Political Reconciliation in the 1940s* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1986); John Summers, “Daniel Bell and *The End of Ideology*.” *Dissent*. Spring 2011 <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/daniel-bell-and-the-end-of-ideology/>

²⁴ For example, Karl Mannheim, *Structures of Thinking* (Routledge, 1980 [1922-24]).

²⁵ Edward Shils, “Ideology: The Concept and Function of Ideology,” in David Sills, ed., *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, vol. 7 (Macmillan, 1968), 66-76, at 66.

²⁶ Isaiah Berlin, *The Power of Ideas*, Henry Hardy, ed. (Chatto & Windus, 2000); Raymond Aron, Raymond. 1985. *History, Truth, Liberty: Selected Writings of Raymond Aron*. Franciszek Draus, ed.; with a memoir by Edward Shils (University of Chicago Press, 1985); Ralf Dahrendorf, *Essays in the Theory of Society* (Stanford University Press, 1968).

But aside from all that, there lies within Gat's book a thread of argument that he cannot resist offering whenever more conventional understandings of ideology seem to him insufficiently precise or comprehensively explanatory. He writes that he has imbibed evolutionary psychology and related Darwinian notions about *homo sapiens sapiens* and is "comfortable" applying these discoveries to current socio-political constellations (viii). He wisely avers that many, if not most, social scientists today will object to his strong commitment to this way of thinking, but he insists that its value far outweighs its drawbacks, and that ignoring our "deep" and "grooved" genetic evolutionary record makes it impossible to understand why humans behave in the ways they do. He recalls from the 1960s the best-sellers by Konrad Lorenz and Robert Ardrey, both of whom enlightened millions of readers about the short distance we have traveled from primate to human behaviors (331, n. 41).²⁷ This has become platitudinous among some anthropologists and their audiences in the other social sciences, not to mention the laity. But Gat wonders throughout his book why more credence is not given to the developmental record of humans as a species when analysts wish to explain war, gender differences, social stratification, occupational achievement, and family structures. He notes that he has accepted the utility of research that connects psyche with genetic structure, sidestepping the broad "social construction of whatever"²⁸ scholarly communities, which he views as unrealistic, uninformed, and enslaved by truncating ideologies.

Gat's use of metaphorical rhetoric throughout the book enlivens what might otherwise become tedious prose. He points repeatedly to the "deep" or "grooved" nature of human behavior vis-à-vis the subtle mixing of our genetic and societal evolution. For example, "national sentiments are one historically shaped expression of a deeply rooted human propensity for affinity, solidarity, and mutual cooperation with their perceived kin-culture communities, a propensity that is evolutionarily engraved in human nature" (222). This untrendy phraseology—"evolutionarily engraved," "innate propensities," "deeply ingrained," "traits of human nature"—constitutes the main analytic rhetoric that supports most of Gat's arguments (see 25, 28, 35, 41, 43, 56, 61, 66, 77-78, 87, 89, 109-110, 135, 159, 216, 275). He supports these arguments with a large and precisely geared bibliographical apparatus laid out in his endnotes (311-336 in reduced font), and if it misses a few key sources, some of which appear above, he has surely made good use of major statements, like, for instance, Steven Pinker's.²⁹

Gat's orientation and use of source material is interdisciplinary, which is welcome and unusual, yet also lends some of the book an unsettling superficiality. It is one thing to claim repeatedly that modern analysts err when they ignore evolutionary psychology or genetics or anthropology in their reckoning with today's socio-political situation. Yet he relies in good faith on his cited sources to make his case. That is, rather than showing how it is that our "deep propensities" lead to, say, ethnic disagreements and war, he assumes that thorough knowledge of the evolutionary record makes the connection obvious (preface; 214-238). It is anything but for the sociologists or historians who have routinely shown that given certain conditions, these

²⁷ Konrad Lorenz, *On Aggression* (Methuen, 1966); Robert Ardrey, *The Territorial Imperative: A Personal Inquiry Into the Animal Origins of Property and Nations* (Atheneum, 1966).

²⁸ See Sica, "Social Construction as Fantasy: Reconsidering Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* after 50 Years," *Cultural Sociology* 10:1 (2016), 37-52.

²⁹ Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (Penguin, 2002); Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (Viking, 2018).

relationships work well or badly, and that no currently knowable “genetic” bases are rigid or directive enough to control how such situations “evolve.”³⁰ He hypothesizes that we will eventually be able to see exactly how these social structures and practices spring from a genetically “programmed” evolutionary base, but thus far, the data does not exist. That said, it is fascinating to learn that chimps “know” to fear snakes before ever having seen one, or that women’s brains light up the scanner differently than do men’s in terms of emotions, or that women are better with words, men with “mathematical word problems” (240-245). But on these thin timbers one cannot build a convincing theory of macro-events in the socio-political environment.

One unusual and creative component of Gat’s approach to these large issues revolves around his regular invocation of David Hume, Immanuel Kant, and other philosophers of consciousness, demonstrating his serious commitment to higher thinking, even when considering prosaic human behavior. From studying these works, he finds himself in unusual ground. For instance, unlike most social scientists today, as opposed to psychiatrists and some psychologists, he deals intelligently with “the irrational” (18-19, 74, 297, 305), that bugaboo of modern life which surrounds us at every turn, but, like a crazed Chekhovian uncle living in a back room of the house, is seldom acknowledged.³¹ He is also fearless about stating the obvious, but important:

The neuroscience feminist with the greatest intellectual balance [Lise Eliot]. . . has written as follows: “why does Hollywood keep regurgitating the same gender stereotypes about math and science? The answer: *because the stereotypes are accurate.*” (274, italics in the book under review).³²

Larry Summers lost the presidency of Harvard for saying the same thing far more subtly (272).

The reader leaves Gat’s book grateful for his thorough and balanced analysis of our ideologically charged world. He covers the major and minor bases well, giving special attention to the evolutionarily attuned understanding of human behavior, down to its neuronal level. One feels that he would not have been stumped by Sgt. York’s remarkable behavior, whether or not it neatly fell within the confines of standard analysis, for Gat has reached further than most of his predecessors who work this puzzling field.

³⁰ Steven J. Heine, *DNA Is Not Destiny: The Remarkable, Completely Misunderstood Relationship between You and Your Genes* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2017); Jonathan H. Turner, Richard Machalek, and Alexandra Maryanski, eds., *Handbook on Evolution and Society: Toward an Evolutionary Social Science* (Paradigm Publishers, 2015).

³¹ See Sica, “Running from Madness? Sociology’s Dread of the Irrational,” in Robert Leroux, Thierry Martin, and Stephen Turner, eds., *Where is Sociology Going? Ideology or Objective Social Science* (Routledge, 2022), 116-131.

³² Lise Eliot, *Pink Brain, Blue Brain: How Small Differences Grow into Troublesome Gaps—and what We Can Do about it* (Houghton, Mifflin, Harcourt, 2009).

I thank all four reviewers, Louise Barrett, Robert Lieber, Catherine Salmon, and Alan Sica, for their positive, indeed, complimentary, sympathetic, and erudite reviews of my book. There seems to be no disagreements at all between us. This is a gratifying and very rare occurrence in the intellectual and public scene, which is so often dominated by deep ideologically rooted schisms.

As mentioned in the reviews, I began writing the book before the terms “fake news” and “alternative facts” were coined, and before the further escalation of America’s ideological cold civil war. What prompted the book was a deep sense of wonderment at the way people tend to be wholly enclosed within their ideological frames and entirely deaf and—indeed, tend to react with total rejection and hostility—to arguments and claims about the world that come from the opposite camp, no matter how valid they might be. Ideology consists of cherished normative prescriptions as to what is just and how social reality should be shaped, together with a roadmap that indicates how these normative prescriptions can be implemented in reality. Ideological fixation is the result of the ever-present tensions and conflicts between our normative wishes and interpretation of the world. It is with the factual, rather than with the normative, claims of ideology that my book is concerned.

After the “death of ideology” and the “End of History” were proclaimed in the 1960s and 1990s,¹ ideological divides and clashes have re-emerged throughout the world. They include not only the challenges to liberal democracy that are presented by authoritarian China and Russia and by jihadist Islam, but also deep cleavages and all-pervasive antagonisms in the liberal democracies themselves. In the United States they have become particularly acute and venomous. The zeal of the opposing sides is often scarcely less than that which characterized the religious ideologies of old. The other side is widely viewed as malicious, irrational, or downright stupid, and, often, as barely legitimate. People are strongly predisposed to regard their own camp as both patently right and righteous, while viewing the other side as malevolent and willfully wrong. In my experience, the prospects of bringing even the best and the brightest—particularly the best and the brightest—on either side of an ideological divide to critically examine their camp’s dogmas or consider the possibility of even a partial validity of some of the other side’s arguments are very slim indeed. In this dialogue of the deaf, the arguments simply do not register and are received with a mixture of contempt and rage.

I needed to clarify, prior to any discussion of ideology and ideological fixation, the questions of what is true and whether there is such a thing as truth. The book argues that while the skeptical tradition concerning the existence of truth has a point, this point has been vastly overdrawn (chap. 1).² The intrinsic flexibility of

¹ Edward Shils, “The End of Ideology?” *Encounter* 5, November 1955: 52–58; Seymour Lipset, “The End of Ideology?,” in Lipset, *Political Man* (Anchor, 1963), 403–417; Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (Collier, 1962), esp. 13–17, 393–407. A collection of these and many other contributions is Chaim Waxman, ed., *The End of Ideology Debate* (Simon & Schuster, 1968), and Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (Free Press, 1992).

² For the classical tradition see: Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism* (Cambridge University Press, 2000). Among the moderns, see Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1967), 481; Michel Foucault, *History of*

human concepts does not make the world itself infinitely flexible. The fact that concepts of reality are construed and therefore involve a subjective element does not mean that they are *entirely* constructed and *wholly* subjective. This intellectual misstep has led the social sciences astray during past decades.

A frequent criticism is that every factual statement about the world is inevitably tied up with, and therefore shaped by, value preferences; that there is no such thing as objectivity about the facts. Some have called this the “Mannheim Paradox,” after the important sociologist of ideology.³ Any rejection of an ideological bias is supposedly grounded in the critic’s own ideological perspective and bias. However, Karl Mannheim himself did not subscribe to the paradox coined after him. He indeed pointed out that facts are not understood in isolation but are viewed from within a particular social context and reflect values and impulses that shape the questions we ask and the perspectives through which we interpret the world. At the same time, he argued that awareness of this should make us more objective. Because every point of view is limited, he thought it best to consider and take into account as many conflicting perspectives as possible, and be flexible and dialectical rather than rigid and dogmatic.⁴ The concept of absolute objectivity is as misleading as that of absolute truth; for although we cannot encompass the totality of the world, there is more or less objectivity in the same way that there is more or less truth to our comprehension of the world. As F. Scott Fitzgerald put it, “The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.”⁵

Morality, or the proper behavior towards others in the social context, is the second element of ideology that needs prior attention (chap. 2). It is widely agreed that we are moral creatures, not in the sense that we act morally all or most of the time, but in that we have a strong and deep proclivity to issue moral judgements and experience feelings of condemnation or approbation—often intense—in response to human behavior. Other questions are more in dispute: Do our moral percepts resonate in some way with the deep structure of the universe or are “true” or “objective” in any other sense? Or are they pure projections of our inner attitudes, feelings and emotions onto the world, and are therefore “subjective” or even “relative” to the individuals or societies that hold them?

In recent decades, philosophers have failed to recognize the major contribution that the Darwinian revolution and the evolutionary perspective made to the understanding of major questions for which there were previously no satisfactory answers⁶: how morality came into being, what sustains it and perhaps also,

Madness (Routledge, 2006 [1961]); Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976); Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (University of Chicago, 1962); Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method* (Verso, 1993 [1975]); Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton University Press, 1979).

³ Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (Routledge, 1954 [1936; original German, 1929]).

⁴ Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, particularly 4–5, 71–80, 88, 91, 94.

⁵ F. Scott Fitzgerald, “The Crack-Up: A Desolately Frank Document from One for Whom the Salt of Life Has Lost its Savor,” *Esquire*, February 1936, 41.

⁶ W.D. Hamilton, “The Genetical Evolution of Social Behaviour,” *Journal of Theoretical Biology*, 7 (1964), 1–16, 17–52; Robert Trivers, “The Evolution of Reciprocal Altruism,” *Quarterly Review of Biology*, 46 (1971), 35–57; idem., “Parent-Offspring Conflict,” *American Zoologist*, 14 (1974), 249–64; E.O. Wilson, *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (Harvard University Press, 1975); Wilson *On Human Nature* (Harvard University Press, 1979); Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford University

to some degree, what can be expected of people morally. The insistence by most present-day philosophers on defining moral norms and precepts as objective, instead of allowing for a more flexible understanding of this evolved phenomenon—an understanding which would transcend the traditional objective-subjective dichotomy—has outlived its usefulness.⁷ Conceived non-metaphysically, this means that our species shares enough of morality’s naturally evolved logic of group cooperation to allow a discussion of morality as a universally familiar phenomenon, while also exhibiting deep, sometimes irreducible, differences.

Premodern ideologies were overwhelmingly religious. Like all ideologies, they combined factual claims about the world with prescribed codes of proper behavior, thus meeting the innate human need for understanding, meaning, and guidance that would help navigate a complex reality. Having written a long chapter (chap. 3) on the many diverse faces of religion and religious ideological fixation, let me quote the chapter’s subtitle: “Examined by a non-hostile atheist” (71).

The Enlightenment and its legacy have secularized the ideological discourse in the developed parts of the world. And yet it has been widely noted that the new ideologies which emerged in the wake of the Enlightenment can be described as secular religions or religion substitutes (111-113). All of them combine factual claims about the social world with views as to what its proper conduct should be and instructions for how to get there. They are all collective creeds which have grouped people around them. This is so because their model of the world has been communicated among their devotees, who could not possibly devise such a model for themselves from scratch; because there is reassurance, increased confidence and a sense of belonging in numbers; and because the shared worldview becomes inseparable from people’s identity. Each ideology projects its own particular mythology, sacred history, icons, prophets, heroes, saints, martyrs, villains and demons. Smears, character assassination, and witch-hunts towards proponents of the other camp are the most common gut response. It never ceases to amaze me how this is the weapon of first resort for many people.

Press, 1976); W.D. Hamilton and Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation* (Basic Books, 1984); Richard Alexander, *The Biology of Moral Systems* (Aldine, 1987); Robert Frank, *Passions within Reason: The Strategic Role of the Emotions* (Norton, 1988); Daniel Dennett, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life* (Simon & Schuster, 1995); Matt Ridley, *The Origins of Virtue: Human Instincts and the Evolution of Cooperation* (Viking, 1996); Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *A Cooperative Species: Human Reciprocity and Its Evolution* (Princeton University Press, 2011); Christopher Boehm, *Moral Origins: The Evolution of Virtue, Altruism, and Shame* (Basic Books, 2012); Michael Tomasello, *A Natural History of Human Morality* (Harvard University Press, 2016); Marc Hauser, *Moral Minds: The Nature of Right and Wrong* (HarperCollins, 2006); Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (Pantheon, 2012); Joshua Greene, *Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason, and the Gap between Us and Them* (Penguin, 2013).

⁷ Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), 147; John McDowell, “Values and Secondary Qualities,” in G. Sayre-McCord, ed., *Essays on Moral Realism* (Cornell University Press, 1988), 166-180; Richard Boyd, “How to Be a Moral Realist”, in Sayre-McCord, ed., *Essays on Moral Realism*, 181-227; Daniel Robinson, *Praise and Blame: Moral Realism and Its Applications* (Princeton University Press, 2002); David Sidorsky, “Incomplete Routes to Moral Objectivity: Four Variants of Naturalism”, *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 18:2 (2001): 177-217; Russ Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism: A Defence* (Oxford University Press, 2003); Terence Cuneo, *The Normative Web: An Argument for Moral Realism* (Oxford University Press, 2007). For the other side see: P. Railton, “Moral Realism,” *Philosophical Review*, 95 (1986), 163-207; and above all, John Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Pelican, 1977).

To be sure, the book does not claim that the differences of value between ideologies do not matter. Ideologies deal with questions of how the world should be organized which are of the highest importance to people's lives. The cognitive "problem" the book addresses is not ideology *per se*. What it means by ideological fixation refers to the ways in which devotion to value preferences may distort understanding of reality. Cognitive biases in interpreting the world may serve the causes people pursue, as single-minded and sometimes narrow-minded convictions are often conducive to galvanizing support and pushing through intellectual and social agendas in the public sphere in the teeth of opposition. Evolution has put a premium on the mobilization of every resource, including our very considerable powers of argumentation, to advance our cause in the never-ending game of social bargaining. Rallying around the flag, closing ranks, and not giving up an inch or allowing for any "concession" to the other side are often the most effective tactics in social bargaining (306-307).

On the other hand, the realization of any value preference or social objective depends on a reliable road map for navigating the world, which in turn requires a roughly valid interpretation of reality. Strong biases in the understanding of reality might lead people away from their desired objectives. Moreover, excessive zeal and fixation might backfire by galvanizing resistance on the other side, thereby forestalling the attainment of the desired aims.

The book examines the three leading ideologies of modernity—liberalism, socialism, and fascism (chap. 4). Marxism is an often-cited example of ideological fixation. Despite the great dissonance between its promise and its realities, Marxist devotees found it exceedingly difficult to shake off the ideology's immense intellectual and emotive spell and give up on its millenarian gospel of justice and salvation. With the profoundest of ironies, despite—or because—of its great intellectual sophistication, Marxism as a political doctrine became "false consciousness" *par excellence*. Fascism similarly functioned as a salvationist creed, and to some degree this applies also to liberalism. The book discusses three contentious topics in today's public sphere in which it argues that ideologically rooted misconceptions figure prominently.

The West's interaction with the "Rest" has been a major subject of soul-searching within the democracies. According to the view originating from the anti-liberal radical left—from the Frankfurt School to the 1960s New Left to the postmodernists—and penetrating mainstream liberalism, it has become commonplace that the West has been exceptionally and supremely bellicose, imperialistic, oppressive, and murderous, while the "indigenous" societies represent natural virtue and intrinsic victimhood.⁸

However, all in all, the opposite is true (chap. 5). Tribal societies around the globe, rather than living in Rousseauian bliss, suffered by far the highest rates of violent mortality.⁹ Premodern state societies everywhere were the scene of endemic, highly lethal wars, imperial conquests, massacres, enslavement,

⁸ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford University Press, 2002 [1947]); Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Beacon, 1964); Foucault's publications in support of the Iranian Revolution are collected in Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson, eds., *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (University of Chicago Press, 2005). See also n. 13, below.

⁹ Azar Gat, "Proving Communal Warfare among Hunter-Gatherers: The Quasi-Rousseauian Error," *Evolutionary Anthropology* 24 (2015): 111–126.

brutal oppression by foreign and indigenous rulers, and an all-pervasive material deprivation.¹⁰ While the West was increasingly successful in all the above during the early modern period, it was later to transform the rules of the game themselves. Indeed, the soul-searching and sense of guilt in democracies is rooted precisely in the new norms of self-criticism and justice that they themselves established. Whereas the right of the victor and conqueror had always been a major legitimizing principle everywhere, modern resistance in the colonies, upholding the moral principles of equality, self-determination, and self-rule was a novelty and a cultural borrowing from the liberal book.

Capitalist-driven modernization and democracy have together witnessed the complete disappearance of war, the threat of war, and the fear of war both between and within states throughout the developed world. The debate about whether war is declining, reignited by the war in Ukraine and the rising threat from China, has failed to note this difference, and compares oranges with cabbage.¹¹ The Rest are still afflicted by war, and the threat and fear of it, precisely because they have not gone through these major developments.

Moreover, imperial rule by the democracies replaced rule by far more violent, oppressive, and corrupt indigenous imperial and local elites everywhere. In many places, India is a major example, it laid the foundations for modernization, including the establishment of modern administrative, judicial, and educational systems and the principle of equality before the law.¹² Indeed, in many former colonies, violent, oppressive, and corrupt indigenous rule has returned with a vengeance. All this flies in the face of the teachings of the Frankfurt school, Jaen-Paul Sartre, Noam Chomsky, Edward Said, and other luminaries, which are accepted as self-evident by educated opinion throughout the liberal West.¹³

Views about the nature of the national phenomenon resonate in the public debate over major political questions, *inter alia* that of immigration. The book makes no pretense to pass judgement on the many complicated policy issues entangled in this debate. It only suggests (chap. 6) that the belief that the very concept of national identity is fake, as well as being illegitimate, is an example of how (mis-)perceptions of fact might affect and be affected by normative choices.¹⁴ Misconceptions regarding the nature of ethnicity and nationality spill over into American foreign policy as well and have contributed to some recent debacles and humanitarian disasters. The precept that nationhood equals citizenship is very far from being

¹⁰ See Gat, *War in Human Civilization* (Oxford University Press, 2006); and Gat, *The Causes of War and the Spread of Peace: But Will War Rebound?* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

¹¹ Azar Gat, "Is the Decline of War a Delusion? The Long Peace Phenomenon and the Modernization Peace – The explanation that Refutes or Subsumes all Others," *Journal of Strategic Studies* (Nov. 2024), 1–25.

¹² See most strikingly, "Address by Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh in acceptance of Honorary Degree from Oxford University," July 08, 2005; https://archivepmo.nic.in/drmanmohansingh/pmvisit_list.php?nodeid=128.

¹³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Communists and Peace* (George Braziner, 1968); "The Legitimacy of Violence as a Political Act?: Noam Chomsky Debates with Hannah Arendt, Susan Sontag, et al, December 15, 1967," Chomsky.Info, <https://chomsky.info/19671215/>; Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Penguin, 1978).

¹⁴ More broadly see Gat, *Nations: The Long History and Deep Roots of Political Ethnicity and Nationalism* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

universally applicable, nor are nationhood and ethnicity *entirely* different concepts. Contrary to American parlance, the Iraqi people, the people of Iraq, and the people *in* Iraq are not synonymous terms.

The revolution in the condition of women during the last century (chap. 7) has cast old-style conservative notions of the natural differences between, and consequent social roles of, men and women as hopelessly archaic and far-fetched. This, however, does not mean that natural differences between men and women do not exist, on average, and influence behavior and choices; nor does it mean that such differences do not interact with, and are reconfigured by, changing historical-cultural conditions; nor does it mean that they should impact the quest for legal and social equality and equal opportunity for women in all walks of life. Who does not know that both nature and nurture count? And yet, this simple notion is quickly forgotten when ideologically charged issues are on the table. People of both sexes are intuitively very well aware of the differences between the sexes, and they tend to act on them in their lives—which, however, all too often has no effect on their deeply held views.

With living ideologies, it is close to impossible for people to step out of a view of the world in which they are totally immersed, to practically step out of their skin, compromise on their normative commitments, diverge from their group identity, and override their emotional investment. Moreover, their ideological outlook is famously associated with their socioeconomic vested interests and party-political calculations.

As I argue in the book, the growing intolerance in progressive circles towards the views of others is extremely disturbing (290). Freedom of speech has always been limited to some degree in reality by social norms as to what is regarded beyond the pale. However, in recent decades, these boundaries have been pushed to cover, and curtail, ever-broader parts of the public debate and scholarly discussion proscribed as politically incorrect. On campuses, there is an increasingly militant suppression of speech and scholarly freedom, mostly carried out by student groups, but often joined by supportive, complicit, or cowed faculty and administration.

Focusing on the factual element of ideology, the book by no means suggests that both sides to an ideological dispute are *equally* right, and that the truth necessarily lies in the middle. It is only submitted that there might be *some* important truths in the arguments on the other side—that they can be, say, 40 or 30 or even 20 percent right. If so, they still deserve serious attention, consideration, and, possibly, adjustments to our own views, even if they do not change our fundamental positions.

Intellectuals are trained to detect ideological biases; are well versed in concepts such as “false consciousness;” and are familiar with past certainties that achieved consensual status but later were proven more fallible. They are aware of the allure of grand narratives and of the need for methodical skepticism and for emotional detachment in research. Still, in different compartments of their minds, it appears that many cannot help it. Ideological fixations seem to be intellectuals’ particular occupational hazard (for more on this see the book’s conclusion). This point is rarely taken kindly by my fellow tradesmen. Many of those who regard it as their duty to criticize everything under the sun are revealed to be incapable of taking criticism themselves, let alone taking it in.

There are some obvious reasons why intellectuals are particularly vulnerable to ideological fixations and biases: the habit of talking *ex-cathedra*, from the authority of their position, which might breed intellectual hubris; the feeling that their special professional knowledge and skills, even though they are usually limited to a particular and sometimes rather esoteric field of specialty, gives them a superior perspective on and special duty with respect to the major questions of the day; the considerable powers of articulation that often come with the trade; and, indeed, the fact that, as they say in German, *Papier ist geduldig*, “paper is patient and tolerant,” offers little resistance. Dealing with ideas, which are manipulated so much more easily than reality, intellectuals are often tempted to dictate the rule to the world. Furthermore, they tend to be isolated in their ivory towers and lack practical experience in the messy affairs of the world.

Probably the most striking criticism ever came from George Orwell: “There are some ideas so absurd that only an intellectual could believe them, no ordinary man could be such a fool.”¹⁵ In his *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, Raymond Aron criticized what he regarded as the mass craze for Communist redemption and the justification of totalitarianism and its worst horrors which dominated the French intellectual scene at the time.¹⁶ The herd mentality of intellectuals strikingly clashes with their self-perception of fierce individuality. This dissonance finds expression in the quip: “why can’t you be a nonconformist just like everybody else?” To avoid a misunderstanding: Boorish ignorance, the spread of wild conspiracy theories, and an offhand dismissal of relevant knowledge cannot be the right response to intellectual hubris. Reason—open-minded and self-critical—remains the key to our species’ tremendous success.

Since much of the above discusses dominant progressive ideological fixations and misperceptions, here are a few points for those who are on the conservative side: Social mobility and opportunity have always been a central part of the American ethos and have constituted part of the argument in favor of American individualism and capitalism. However, there are increasing indications that the widening income gap in the United States translates to diminishing social mobility and decreasing opportunities for the less well-off, perhaps to a lower level than in Europe.¹⁷

Is such a trend sustainable economically, socially, and politically, let alone desirable from a conservative perspective? Aristotle held that the middle class is the mainstay of a stable mixed regime or polity. Alexis de Tocqueville believed that the United States’ exceptional levels of education and landownership (property) in his time were central to the democratic spirit in America.¹⁸ This is surely also a modern conservative

¹⁵ George Orwell, “Written [May 1945]; Polemic, [No. 1, October 1945],” in Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, eds., *George Orwell: The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters*, Volume 3 (David Godine, 2000), 279.

¹⁶ Raymond Aron, *The Opium of the Intellectuals* (Calmann-Lévy, 1955).

¹⁷ Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Harvard University Press, 2014), 293 and 484; also from the left: Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (Simon & Schuster, 2000); Putnam, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis* (Simon & Schuster, 2015); and from the right, Charles Murray, *Coming Apart: The State of White America 1960–2010* (Crown, 2012). Additionally, see Miles Corak, “Income Inequality, Equality of Opportunity, and Intergenerational Mobility,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 27:3 (2013), 79–102; J. Blanden, “Cross-Country Rankings in Intergenerational Mobility: A Comparison of Approaches from Economics and Sociology,” *Journal of Economic Surveys*, 27 (2013), 38–73.

¹⁸ Alexis de Tocqueville, Henry Reeve, trans., *Democracy in America* (Saunders & Otley, 1835).

notion. In principle, conservatives need not be reminded by progressives that liberty and equality are not separate and wholly conflicting values, for the reason that without a significant measure of equality there is no true liberty. Indeed, are growing socioeconomic gaps not going to further escalate the cold civil war that is already raging in the United States?

Side by side with the conservative view of the “undeserving poor” who free-ride the system, there is the opposite view of the “undeserving rich” who exploit their position in the system to extract fabulous rents. This is not just a progressive position but, in principle, also a modern conservative one, as free-market doctrine opposes any distortion of efficient market operation by monopolies and rent-seekers. And yet the system appears “rigged” to many Americans, and in practice there does not seem to be any real effort by conservatives to remedy this situation.

Both sides of the ideological-political debate should pause and ask themselves something like the following questions: after all the offensives and counteroffensives in the ideological trench war, are they making any real progress, and are they likely to defeat the other? Having virtually fought each other to a standstill, is the stalemate producing much good? Is the mutually inflicted damage not too costly for the game to continue along the same lines? Is the current “crisis of democracy” not largely due to the ideological and political impasse? Are there any prospects of a return to a more constructive bi-partisan approach? Or are the sides’ respective ideological fixations stronger than them both?

It is remarkable how successful we are in getting not to know what we know all too well. As Saul Bellow has put it: “A great deal of intelligence can be invested in ignorance when the need for illusion is deep.”¹⁹ The power of ideology over minds is immense, and it can move mountains. At the same time, experience teaches that it may sometimes end in a disastrous clash against the rocks of reality.

¹⁹ Saul Bellow, *To Jerusalem and Back* (Odyssey, 2000 [1976]), 100.