

Formal Ideologies - An EXTREMELY BROAD Overview¹

Introduction

This paper looks very briefly at 12 *schools of thought* - **Anarchism, Christianity, Conservatism, Existentialism, Fascism, Feminism, Humanism, Individualism, Liberalism, Marxism, Pragmatism and Socialism**. At best, it is designed to give you a **very general feel** for the inclinations of each.

What is an Ideology?

An ideology is simply a **packaging of compatible values**. Ideology helps us to answer the question: *Why?*

A personal ideology is a means to identify, make conscious and structure the motivating values underlying our behaviour. By becoming aware of our values and the relationships between them, we can better judge whether our community service practice is consistent, and whether we are likely to have our intended impact on the people we interact with. Clarifying our personal ideology is a key means to understanding what we do.

Over time, individuals and groups of people have progressively tested their values, and packaged together ideas that are compatible ... then named these packages. These are what we call **formal ideologies**.

The main value of formal ideologies is that they can provide a *short cut* in your own ideological development. Formal ideologies are most useful when considered **a tool, not an answer**. With so many complex values to think through, it would probably be impossible to test the congruence of every value you hold, against every other value you hold. So ... if you happen to agree with several key values held by a particular ideology, you may find it useful to explore the other thinking of this school of thought.

Essentially, ideologies are concerned with answering 4 key questions:

- What is the nature of human beings? The role/existence of higher power(s)?
- What is the relationship between individuals and groups (eg. families, communities)?
- How should societies be organised and managed (eg. leadership, government)?
- What are legitimate means of social maintenance or change?

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The answers to these questions inform:

1. A **description** of the world as it is,
2. A **vision** of the world as it should be,
3. An **analysis** of what's wrong with the world as it is, and,
4. **Strategies** for getting there!

Arguably, there is no such thing as *Liberalism*, or *Feminism*, or *Marxism* or ... **People holding a wide range of interpretations of the meaning of life, often use the same label to describe their thinking.** This can occur to the extent of holding opposite/contradictory beliefs on key principles (eg. *Syndicalist Anarchism* and *Individualistic Anarchism*; *Liberation Theology* and *Conservative Christianity*).

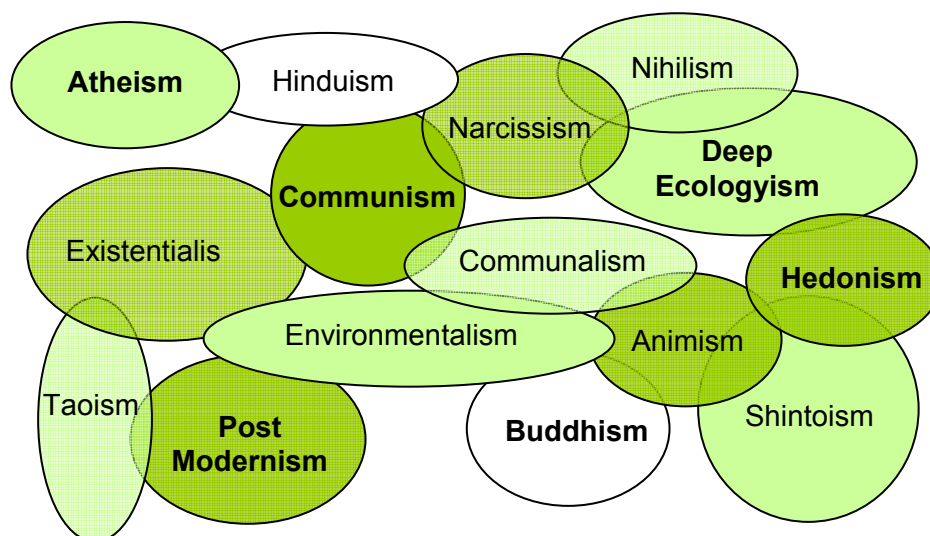
In this paper, formal ideologies are therefore referred to as **...isms**.

The Range of Ideologies Available

Historically, ideology has largely functioned to protect elites. Mystical jargon has been *owned* by a few, each claiming legitimate interpretation of a particular label (eg. *true conservatives*, *ideologically-sound socialists*). A lot of time has been spent competing for ownership of the *correct line*.

Accordingly, whilst each **version** of *an ideology* is an attempt to package a series of values that work together, often ideas drawn from **across** that ideology are neither congruent nor integrated. Coherence and logic do not necessarily exist amongst all the sets of ideas that are titled with the same *ideological label*.

This leads to an incredibly complex range of ideological perspectives **within each ideology** - let alone, **across** ideologies. And ... the list of ideologies is much longer than those mentioned sofar. Try these additional ones, for a little added complexity!



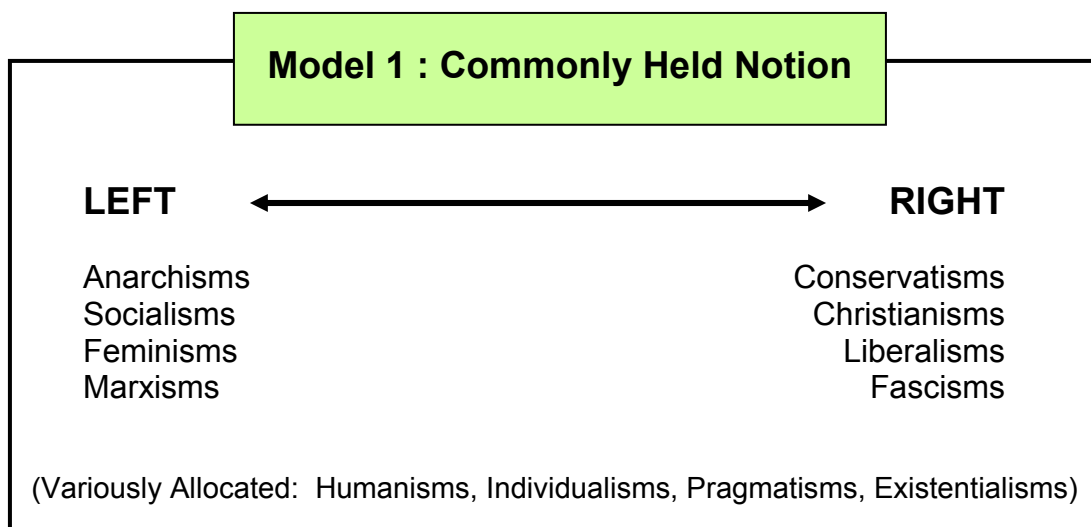
Given the range of personal values we hold, and the large number of formal ideologies, we have 3 main options:

1. To be so daunted by the complexity of it all, that we become **immobilised** ... and avoid thinking about the impact of our beliefs on our practice at all.
2. To become totally preoccupied with *the search*, to the extent that we actually end up **doing nothing** with our learning.
3. To accept that our chance of developing a useful personal ideology is as good as anyone else's, and find some balance between **exploration and action**.

Clearly, the latter is most likely to have positive outcomes for the people we work with!

Getting a Conceptual *Feel* for Formal Ideologies

The following models are an attempt to place the key ideologies in Western Society, in a context. **None** is *strictly correct* ... all are designed to offer a sense of the main principles behind different ideologies, and look at the relationships between them. Because of the many *versions* of each ideology, in some cases the location of a particular ideology might be quite incorrect.

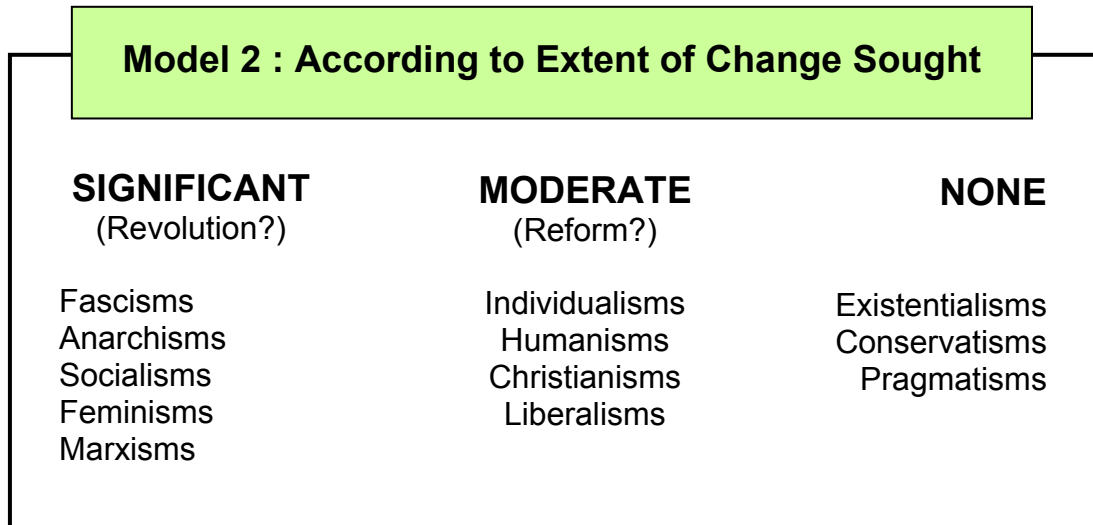


Problems with Model 1:

- How do you define *left* and *right*? (... apparently, according to how popular the ideas are with the dominant culture!)
- Too many exceptions to the rule apply. Many versions of the *isms* transcend *left/right* boundaries (eg. *Individualistic Anarchism* and *Liberal Feminism* clearly hold

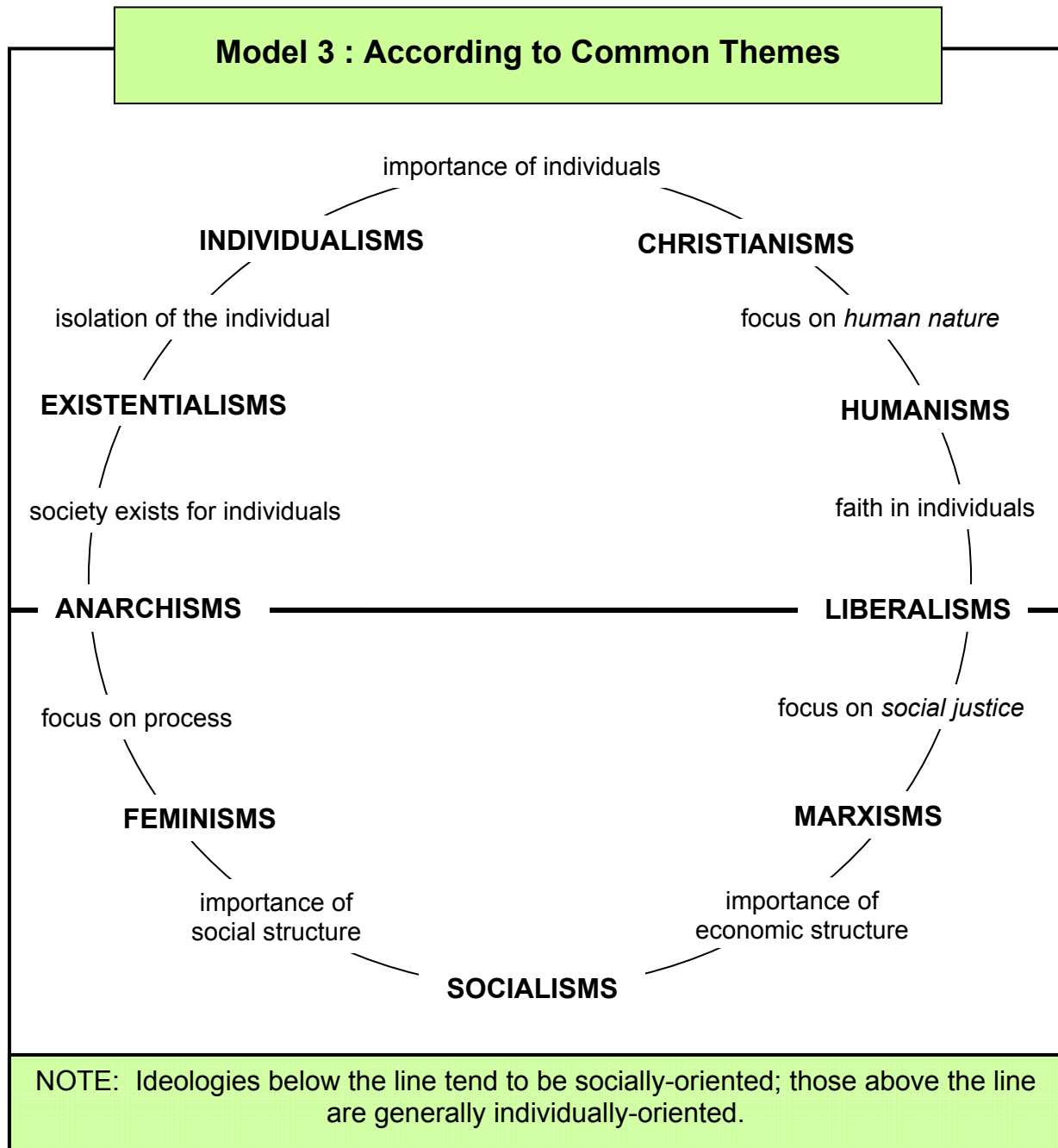
more in common with *right wing* ideologies, than with the *left*; *Liberation Theology* draws heavily on *left wing* thinking).

- The model is a relative one, liable to vary with time and popularity. It doesn't deal effectively with philosophies that operate relative to the *status quo* - particularly *Conservatisms* and *Pragmatisms*.
- In short, it is an unstable, reactive model.



Problems with Model 2:

- It doesn't really tell us much. Streams of ideological thinking which, long term, seek significant change might, nonetheless, use a range of shorter term *realistic, achievable* strategies. These may not differ significantly from those seeking moderate reform, at this point in time.
- Identifying certain ideologies as *revolutionary* implies that they commonly seek sudden, dramatic change. In fact, these ideological streams differ enormously in their commitment to the **means** of change and the **ends** of the process.



Problems with Model 3:

- It still doesn't **begin** to recognise the complexities of the similarities and differences within and between ideologies.
- The *linking ideas* are not necessarily equally important to each stream of ideological thought.

So ... What are the Central Tenets of Each Ideology?

The following² are deliberately **extremely** basic ... or maybe even simplistic? They are intended **only** to give a **sense** of key thinking within the ideological stream. Each looks at the central premise (philosophy) - it doesn't also include the application/process of this thinking (ideology) since this is much less clearly distinguished between lines of thought:

<p>Anarchisms - Human beings have the ability to be self-governing.</p> <p>Christianisms - Human beings are essentially <i>evil</i>, and must be saved by a <i>god</i> (ie. <i>good!</i>).</p> <p>Conservatisms - The <i>status quo</i> should be maintained until it can be proven that any given alternative is better.</p> <p>Existentialistisms - <i>I am.</i></p> <p>Fascisms - Those who are <i>born to rule</i> should be left free to get on with the job!</p> <p>Feminisms - Gender is a fundamental determinant of the individual and social structure.</p> <p>Humanisms - Human beings are essentially <i>good</i> (<i>god!</i>)</p> <p>Individualisms - Meeting individual preferences is the most important function of a society.</p> <p>Liberalisms - A <i>just</i> social structure derives from everyone having equal access to opportunities to achieve within it.</p> <p>Marxisms - Economic power is the critical determinant of the social structure.</p> <p>Pragmatisms - If it <i>works</i> ... do it!</p> <p>Socialisms - Economic power, and at least one other form of power (eg. political, social, cultural), determines social structure.</p>

Conclusion

Ideologies offer a range of interpretations of our society. Generally, these express some dissatisfaction about its imperfection. They focus their attention on the causes (*macro* and/or *micro*). They provide the elements of a vision of a future, better, society ... and how to begin to achieve it.

Formal ideologies can provide an invaluable tool in developing our personal ideologies. They help us to see discrepancies and inconsistencies in our thinking. They provide ideas on the possible long term consequences of our actions. In short, they can resource our path a more consistent and ethical community services practice.

² Thanks to Gill Westhorp for assistance with these.