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EDITORIAL

New ideological conflicts. Trends, actors and new networks

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1. Ideologies matter. Towards an analytical model of political ideas in the multipolar context

What is the point of discussing political ideologies today? And above all, what kind of ideologies are we dealing with today? What is the contemporary ideological landscape, and how can we study it? These are the questions posed by this special issue, which aims to address the sociological and political study of ideological phenomena in the contemporary global context—marked by new forms of global and local conflicts, as well as new forms of common sense.

There are at least three reasons that justify a renewed interest in the sociological study of ideologies. The first has to do with the new geopolitical landscape. The second concerns the decline of the neoliberal refrain of the “end of ideologies.” The third is that today we are able to study political ideologies without subjecting them to value judgments but rather viewing them in close connection with their social context, thanks to the development of new epistemological and methodological perspectives introduced by the so-called morphological approach pioneered by Michael Freeden. This new field of studies allows us to identify key analytical elements upon which to build a new model for analyzing political ideas, through a comparative study centered on socio-political contexts.

Ideological phenomena in a multipolar world. The recent global context increasingly shows that we have entered a new phase of global political history, marked by what is potentially a transition in hegemony (Arrighi & Silver, 2024). Following a period of rivalry between the Western and Soviet-socialist systems that lasted for most part of the post-war period, and following a U.S.- and Western-dominated world order characterized by globalization and by the confidence in trade between nations despite political differences, we are now entering a multipolar phase. In this new era, powers like China, Russia, Brazil, and India are driving forces behind a new world order or, at the very least, are major challengers to the old Western order.

The war in Ukraine, in particular, has marked a turning point in the perception of political power. For years, global power largely relied on soft power and the idea that open conflict, especially between major powers, was no longer necessary. However, the images of Russian tanks on Ukrainian soil have resurrected a 20th-century conception of politics and hard power, where conflicts are violent, global, and divisions are sharp. Some commentators have responded by suggesting that globalization has ended and that the world is once again divided like it was during the Cold War.

Certainly the ongoing war has led to the emergence of new divisions. It is difficult not to define these as ideological. For example, these divides exist between democratic and non-democratic countries, between the West and emerging nations, and between liberal-democratic states and authoritarian governments.

One of the clearest signs of this new trend was the speech given by Chinese President Xi Jinping in the fall of 2022, following the beginning of Ukraine-Russia war, during the Chinese Communist Party Congress. Xi delivered a strongly Marxist speech, surprising many international commentators. Among them was Kevin Rudd, former Australian Prime Minister and one of the leading experts on Asian politics, who wrote an important editorial in “Asia Society” titled *Xi Jinping, the Rise of Ideological Man, and the Acceleration of Radical Change in China* (Rudd 2022).

According to Rudd, under Xi Jinping, we are witnessing a new phase of China’s global strategy, characterized by a clear return to a Maoist Marxist-Leninist perspective. This shift is surprising because it follows decades of reformist openness and ideological softening. While many saw this as merely a rhetorical acknowledgment of the origins of revolutionary socialism, experts such as Rudd interpret Xi Jinping’s speech as an unmistakable sign of a profound doctrinal and programmatic shift aimed at strengthening the role of the Chinese Communist Party in new international political and economic arenas.

The war in Ukraine has accelerated the emergence of a new multipolar world order, which the new geopolitical actors are interpreting through a political framework designed to assert their distinct identity in contrast to the Western liberal-democratic bloc. China, by reviving its strongly neo-Marxist ideological discourse and projecting it onto the international stage, aims to offer an alternative vision for all countries that believe in multipolarism and a new ideological worldview. In this sense it may be said that this new multipolar scenario corresponds to a new phase it helps generate in which ideological visions and conflicts will play a central role.

The end of the ideology of the “End of ideology”. The rise of new ideological conflicts challenges a notion that has dominated the past 20 to 30 years, especially in the Western world, and has significantly influenced studies on this subject: the “end of ideologies.” It is important to ask why this idea emerged and why it gained so much traction. By doing so, we will understand that this narrative was shaped by a strategy that was itself ideological and that it objectively indicates a paradigm shift in the configuration of ideologies.

The expression “end of ideologies” gained prominence in the late 1980s and found wide acceptance not only in the media but also in academic articles. It was based on a widely held belief that ideologies had disappeared with the end of the 20th century, and that ours was a post-ideological era. Beyond their actual content, commonplace notions such as this one reflect a central element of the dominant mindset. This particular notion referred to 20th-century ideologies such as socialism, fascism, communism, liberalism, and so on (Bracher 1984; Bobbio 1986).

It is important to clarify that what truly ended were the ideologies of the 20th century—those marked by strong doctrinal frameworks, closely connected to party organizations, and rooted in well-defined collective and social bases. The new ideologies have simply taken on a different form, becoming more tactical, more hybrid, and more “goal-oriented.”

There is another important aspect to consider: the “end of ideologies” slogan emerged from a specific, hegemonic ideological strategy. As Freeden has explained, it was a slogan born from the dominance of liberalism over other ideologies (Freeden 1998), more specifically, from the neoliberal variant of the liberal tradition, which more than any other ideology shaped the public perception of political ideologies during the transition from 20th-century ideological frameworks to contemporary ones (Moini 2020). By declaring that ideologies no longer existed, neoliberalism presented itself as non-ideological, as an objective and scientific alternative. The current crisis of the neoliberal order has allowed for a more disillusioned view of this strategy (Gerstle, 2022).

The morphological approach and its potential. With the spread of the “end of ideologies” refrain, starting in the 1990s, Michael Freeden and other authors developed a new approach to ideological phenomena that significantly reshaped the field of ideology studies (Freeden, 1998). Initially a minority perspective, this approach has gained prominence and transformed how ideologies are understood. One of the most representative examples of its success is the work of Mudde and Kaltwasser, who applied this interpretative approach to develop a theory of populism as a “thin-centered” ideology (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017).

According to the morphological approach, ideologies are dynamic, articulated, and complex cognitive and social constructs. A key feature of this view is the importance of the conceptual configuration that ideologies acquire. Another critical aspect of this approach is its emphasis on the role of social and historical contexts, as well as the functional logic of ideologies in relation to the dynamics of power within those contexts. As Freeden aptly explains: “Ideologies are complex combinations and clusters of political concepts in sustainable patterns” (Freeden 2003, p. 51).

In light of the morphological approach, which views ideologies as social forms of political thought and focuses on their social contexts, we can identify some typical and significant dimensions of contemporary ideological phenomena: depoliticization, hybridization, and tacticism.

Depoliticization. This term refers to a process of simplification that weakens any form of intermediary or mediating body, favoring direct mechanisms of both deliberation and governance. Depoliticization is a contextual characteristic because contemporary ideologies often emerge in a depoliticized environment, yet they also contribute to further depoliticizing these contexts. It is undeniable that depoliticization is a product of the neoliberal macro-ideology, which has profoundly reshaped institutional frameworks and redefined the logic of democratic functioning. As Michele Sorice has noted, depoliticization ultimately “reduces politics to the realm of policy, marginalizing both ideological conflict and polity as a community of projects” (Sorice 2021, p. 34). Depoliticization has hollowed out the social and political mediation activities inherent to democratic systems, favoring a reconfiguration of political power based on governance models, which are grounded in the logic of New Public Management (Sørensen & Torfing 2017) and globalization processes (Steger 2009). Neoliberal depoliticization has gradually promoted a model of democratic power management fully expressed in technocratic governance (Hay 2014). Thus, new ideologies emerge in contexts where the aim is not to generate new political institutions but rather to weaken existing ones, making them comparatively more depoliticizing than ideologies of the past.

Hybridization. Unlike the 20th-century ideologies that were characterized by clear doctrinal coherence—for instance, communism was easily distinguishable from conservatism and liberalism—today’s ideologies are more hybrid, combining elements from different traditions. This phenomenon, called hybridization, refers to the presence of mixed components taken from ideologically opposed families that are distinct in real political actors. Mauro Barisione claims that contemporary ideologies are almost always a blend of elements from different value spheres (which he calls “polar stars”), corresponding to historically determined political ideologies such as liberalism, socialism, and conservatism (Barisione, 2021).

From the perspective of social actors, hybridization also reveals another difference between the old 20th-century ideologies and contemporary ones. The former were based on social classes, while the latter develop in economically post-Fordist, socially hyper-individualistic, and politically post-democratic contexts. Contemporary ideologies are therefore individual-based—grounded in the individual, who constructs his or her own ideology like a patchwork (Anselmi, 2023).

Tacticism. Another key feature of contemporary ideologies, from a morphological perspective, is their relationship with objectives and time. 20th-century ideologies were strategic in nature, they were aimed at building a new society, grounded in a strong social doctrine, often based on philosophical and teleological principles. Their explicit goal was to create a social type and a new order. These ideologies had a strategic vision and were consciously projected in time and history. For instance, communism, socialism, and liberalism sought to transform the existing social and political balance to construct a new social model and a new human and social type. This strategic framework influenced the organization of social groups, with clear task divisions and a clear logistical and functional articulation.

In contrast, contemporary ideologies are primarily tactical, as they are focused on maintaining political consensus in the present. This tactical nature is closely related to populism, which is inherently tactical and chameleon-like, blending both progressive and conservative elements. As Taggart observed, populisms can be adapted and are tactical, capable of adjusting to the historical-political phase they find themselves in. Contemporary ideologies, therefore, follow the populist framework of contemporary politics (Taggart, 2000).

2. The contributions of the special issue

This special issue features six contributions that explore the phenomenon of new ideological conflicts from different perspectives. In the article *Back to the Future. New and Old Ideologies in Russia: Socialism and Nationalism as Tools for Political Legitimization*, Flaminia Saccà and Nataliya Velikaya focus on the

entrenchment of new ideologies in Russia, following the phase of de-ideologization after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This article analyzes how, in recent years, Russian political discourse has revived old nationalist archetypes, in relation to the discourse of political and cultural elites regarding the country's role in the world. New geopolitical structures and an evolving system of international relations contribute to a reconfiguration of Russian ideological frameworks. Additionally, survey data from national population samples reveal the penetration of a neo-imperial narrative.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and a brief period of de-ideologization, the Russian government has repeatedly tried to develop a new national ideology, primarily using the concepts of the "Russian world" and "neo-Eurasianism." Nationalism appears both as an ideology and as a political practice, serving the traditional function of symbolic cohesion.

Russian neo-conservatism blends different ideological models, all centered around the idea of the unity and centrality of the "Russian world." This neo-conservative ideology has become the socio-cultural foundation for the process of legitimizing power and promoting a sort of "Make Russia Great Again" agenda. It also taps into nostalgia for certain elements of the Soviet past. While the 1990s were dominated by political discourse and public debate centered on democratization and the transition from an authoritarian to an open society, only a decade later, during Putin's first term, the political narrative shifted toward the centrality of "stability" and the "sustainability of the system and welfare state." This shift was accompanied by the idea of so-called "conservative modernization," which essentially invoked nostalgic elements of the socialist past. The article combines an analysis of public speeches by prominent political leaders with survey data from the project *How Are You, Russia?* (1992-2023), conducted by the Institute of Socio-Political Research at the Federal Center for Theoretical and Applied Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences. This allows for the observation of the evolution of political values of Russian citizens over the past three decades.

In the article *The Ideological Transformation in the Spanish Party System*, Francesco Campolongo and José Javier Olivás Osuna remind us that the Spanish party system is structured around two complementary divisions: left/right and center/periphery. From 2008 to the present, a series of external shocks (such as the economic crisis) and internal shocks (such as the Catalan crisis, COVID-19, and the war in Ukraine) have contributed to the fragmentation of the party system. This has led to the rapid rise and fall of national and regional outsider parties on both the right and left of the spectrum. In the Spanish context, the ideologies of the parties, in a morphological sense, have undergone a process of renewal and adaptation to the contingent fractures arising from various crises. This has resulted in a transformation of party actors, their symbolic representations, and their political communication, fundamentally altering the party system. In particular, we can identify a "populist" phase following the mobilizations of 15M, which focused on the renewal/conservation divide within the political class and the division on the issue of redistribution (leading to the rise of Podemos and Ciudadanos). There has also been a "nationalist" phase, driven by the evolution of the national conflict in Catalonia and the subsequent strengthening of regional left-wing forces, alongside the rise of central Spanish nationalism (represented by Vox). Finally, COVID-19 may have amplified feelings of insecurity and the spread of denialist rhetoric, which is not limited to the pandemic but also encompasses issues such as climate change, thereby creating new symbolic divisions that established ideologies must confront. In each of these phases, there seems to be one or more parties capable of best interpreting the contingencies through an ideological proposal that gradually incorporates new splits around the central ideologies of the left and right (a mix of hybridization and tactical approaches?). The article argues that in a phase of multiplying "political shocks," classic divisions and their interpreters are continually forced to articulate new divisions and renew their ideological and symbolic language through a process of change that does not discard the original ideological imprint but transforms it.

Mattia Diletti's article titled *The role of right-wing think tanks in ideological hybridizations. The case of Burke Foundation* addresses the relationship between "ideological production" and intellectuals. The article

explores the hybridization of ideologies of ideologies in recent years, examining the Edmund Burke Foundation, an American think tank. It is based on the assumption that political ideologies have once again become a field of political struggle following the hegemonic crisis of the American neoliberal model. In these phases of ideological reconfiguration, intellectuals and the organizations that host them, like think tanks, act as “enablers of ideologies” due to their ability to provide cultural “products” for use in political conflict and when a critical moment arises to reshape and hybridize old and new ideologies. The article focuses on a new product of the “market of ideas” and ideological constructs, namely national conservatism, understood as a bridge between “old conservatism” and the new illiberal nationalism that has emerged in the populist decade. Think tanks serve as “blenders” of ideological products from both the past and present. To this end, the Edmund Burke Foundation is analyzed as a think tank that emerged during the crisis of the American neoliberal model, characterized by an anti-globalist stance yet with a strong transnational influence. National conservatism thus becomes an ideological tool for parties and leaders, allowing them to utilize a shared lexicon that can be tailored to different nationalisms and national contexts. In this sense, think tanks are places for the elaboration and parallel diplomacy among representatives of national conservatism, playing a significant role in providing legitimacy to the actors involved.

In the contribution by Melissa Mongiardo and Marco Palmieri, titled *Opposite Universes: A Focus on the Ideological Polarization of the Italian Electorate*, the theme of ideological conflicts is explored through a study on the ideological polarization of the Italian electorate, starting from the results of the 2022 political elections.

The work examines electoral polarization from a sociological perspective, viewing voting behavior as an epiphenomenon of deeper value dimensions that leads to ideologically and territorially defined positions. The research hypothesis is that electoral behavior takes different forms in various territorial contexts and is influenced by the socioeconomic and demographic structural attributes of those areas. Following Mannheim’s assumptions, the authors consider ideologies as reflections of specific historical and social environments, which, in this phase, take the form of dynamic constructs—social forms of thought shaped by a complex combination of factors. Ideologies, according to Freeden’s morphological approach, are strongly influenced by the context in which they manifest themselves and are situated in specific spaces and places. The concept of polarization, which, like other concepts such as populism, is characterized by a high degree of polysemy, is considered here as a grassroots phenomenon marked by a horizontal trend that measures the ideological distance between political forces based on the positioning of voters along a given ideological continuum.

The research is based on a comparative analysis of the structural contexts of territories derived from a series of socioeconomic and demographic indicators, as well as the forms that electoral behavior takes in the various districts holding more than one ballot. The results of the analysis reveal how economic structure and the characteristics of the territories influence electoral choices, outlining a picture of Italy divided into two opposing blocks, each characterized by complex ideological systems and different forms of electoral competition. The center-north is home to the so-called systemic forces, while the territories of the South serve as the stage for the so-called hybrid-tactical forces. From these empirical findings, the authors systematize a reflection on the nature and causes of these opposing universes created by electoral polarization.

From this premise, the author embarks on a more detailed reflection on the return of ideologies in the new era of post-democracy. These ideologies, assuming the role of collective signifiers, inevitably generate value conflicts.

The article *Competing Articulations of National Belonging vis-à-vis Immigration: South Africa, Czechia, and Slovakia Compared*, by Ondřej Filipec, Valerie Kondo, and Lucie Macková, addresses ideologies by focusing on the different forms of nationalism that oppose immigration and drive populist parties in South Africa, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia.

Using a comparative perspective, the article is based on three case studies: the Operation Dudula movement in South Africa, the anti-immigration populist party SPD (Freedom and Direct Democracy) in the Czech Republic, and the neo-Nazi party ĽSNS (People's Party Our Slovakia) in Slovakia. The aim of the article is to analyze the nature of these three political forces, focusing on the populist/nationalist dynamics that arise from the conflict between national identity and anti-immigration sentiments, which inform the narrative, propaganda, and political action of the three parties. To achieve this, the study proceeds on different levels of empirical analysis. First, it compares the South African populist discourse on migrants from neighboring countries with that of the Czech and Slovak populist parties, which often reference migration from the Middle East and Africa, fostering anti-Islamic and xenophobic sentiments in their respective territories. Secondly, through the examination of the parties' programmatic platforms and social media communication, the article outlines the genealogy of these political forces, their ideological references, and the discursive dynamics that engage the electorate. Considering the concept of populism as closely linked to nationalism, the authors note how by adopting the "us versus them" perspective, which serves as a paradigm for building consensus among the three political forces, they also address the theme of vigilantism, viewed as an operational strategy and complementary element of populism.

Despite the differing geographical locations, the heterogeneity of the territories, varying economic and sociocultural contexts, and the specific characteristics of the parties, it is notable that empirical evidence reveals a strong convergence in using immigration as a political and cognitive mobilization tool capable of generating emotional reactions that evoke feelings of national identity.

Hans-Joerg Trez's contribution, titled *Value Conflicts and the (Post) Democratic Constellation of Society*, addresses the theme of ideologies by focusing on the so-called value conflicts that animate contemporary democracies. In light of the complex debate surrounding the end of ideologies, against the backdrop of the individualization process in society—whereby values emerge not determined by class interests but by individual choices influenced by contingent events—Trenz articulates a profound reflection on the relationship between ideology, values, and democracy. In this scenario, a decisive role is played by the diminishing ideological connotation of political parties, which has paved the way for new identity-based and populist movements that threaten representative democracy in its original form.

The contribution starts from the assumption that the process of deconstructing Western democracies is intimately connected to the emergence of new values that generate identity conflicts and increase forms of value polarization, eroding the shared consensus on the foundational principles and values of democracies.

Given the transformation of certain structural elements of society, and considering ideologies as inherent to democracies, the author questions the nature of these new conflicts among polarized groups characterized by the clash between hyper-individualism and hyper-collectivism. These conflicts, while being a continuation of old ideological oppositions, take the form of new configurations of democracy. The interplay between new ideological hybridizations and new configurations of democracy is precisely one of the frontiers this issue aimed to explore.

The articles in this special issue, in their variety, illustrate how new ideological conflicts are emerging in different contexts, shaped by regional specificities yet influenced by the ongoing multipolar transformation. The morphological analyses presented reveal polarizations and clusters of new values that, often in hybrid forms, guide political and social actors in ways fundamentally different from the traditional ideological frameworks of the 20th century. These cases demonstrate that ideologies are far from obsolete and that a new, complex, and articulated global ideological landscape is taking shape.

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