RESEARCH ARTICLE

Value conflicts and the (post) democratic constellation of society

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ABSTRACT:

Western democracies rather than being consolidated are increasingly shattered by new value and identitarian conflicts. Instead of a widening consensus about core democratic values, we observe the intensification of value polarisation. Even European integration, which was meant to promote its core foundational principles to be embraced by member states and citizens across the European social and political space, continues, as shown by numerous opinion polls, to be divided by value clashes. In light of these contrasting experiences, I ask: How can we explain the new salience of value conflicts in democracy despite the postulated end of ideologies? What, if anything distinguishes value conflicts from old ideological polarisations? Drawing on empirical examples of social media polarisations, I will argue that such new value conflicts between polarised groups (e.g. liberals against anti-liberals) are to be understood as a continuation and not a discontinuation of old ideological divides. As such, they should be interpreted either as disruptions of existing democracy or as departure towards novel forms of democratic government and not as the heralds of a new age of post-democracy and post-ideology.

1. The end of ideologies and the age of democracy

The assertion of the end of ideologies, as made by Bell (1962) and others in the sixties of the last century, is commonly seen in relation to what is perceived as the consolidation of post-war (Western) democracies. Precisely because pluralism of opinion prevails and diversity is recognised, there is no longer any political space for fixed ideological beliefs. Ideologies fade away as democracies flourish. Putting an end to ideologies means engaging in rationalisation, leaving behind the dogmas of the past and the utopias of the future, and replacing statements of principle with pluralistic argumentation and learning from diverse experiences. After the fall of communism, utopian thinking was eventually replaced by incremental progress and the pragmatism of liberals, who were able to declare a renunciation of both ideology and history, pointing to the linear progression of liberal democracy as the universal and ultimate model of legitimate government. (Fukuyama 1992).

The end of ideologies was therefore of little concern to democrats. Many saw it as a sign of democratic consolidation, not regression. There was a chance for citizens and political parties to emancipate themselves from ideologies and engage in civic learning (Biesta, De Bie, and Wildemeersch 2013). The age of democracy was just beginning, after ideologies could be dismissed as a prejudice of the past. Democracy-enhancing reforms included the enactment of citizenship and individual participation at the local level. In such new participatory and deliberative designs of democracy, the old ideologies became a nuisance. From a cosmopolitan vision, too, the end of ideologies could be welcomed as a way of overcoming statehood, to which ideologies were seen as inextricably linked (Archibugi 2003).

In what follows, I will engage with this debate about the end of ideologies and the future of democracy. I situate my contribution within the sociological tradition of reconstructing political thought, which does not seek to empirically test the viability of norms or assess their generalised validity. Rather, in the tradition of critical theory, I propose a reconstruction of political ideas used to legitimise the exercise of power over time in response to a structural transformation of markets, media and related forms of socialisation. In approaching the role of ideologies and values in constituting democratic government, my intention is not to decide the fate of democracy, but rather to understand how the acclaimed end of ideologies has been variously associated with the triumph or crisis of democracy. I argue that Western democracies have been reinterpreted in recent decades as being based primarily on values rather than ideologies. Such a redefinition of the ideational base of democracy is driven by major social structural changes in the process of individualisation and singularisation of society, as facilitated by new media communication, and, in particular, the transition from one-to-many mass media political communication to multidirectional social media communication. But there is also a normative argument, often made, that democracy's claim to value is not just temporal or partial (as would be the case with competing ideologies) but universal (Sen, 1999: 11). In this sense, democracy as a value is not defined in terms of substance in relation to other values (which would be the typical way of defining ideologies), but in terms of procedure in the Kantian sense of what everyone can agree on as principles of good government. It is then up to a moral theory of justice to extract the reasonable commitments essential to liberal democracy, including the rule of law, human rights, freedom of expression, and personal autonomy (Rawls, 1971). In the second part of the article, I offer a critique of this account of the supremacy of democratic values over ideologies, based on the assumption that ideologies are not external to democracies but intrinsic to them. This allows me to discuss the new age of post-democracy as a return of ideologies.

The idea of the end of ideology, coupled with the end of history, has a normative and a functional point of reference. Normatively, it postulates the superiority or higher legitimacy of liberal democracy over other 'ideologies' of power. Functionally, it simply postulates that democratic systems, in the absence of ideological polarisation, are better able to ensure the well-being of their members. If democracies have survived the past era of ideological polarisation as the more normatively desirable and more viable system of government, this does not mean that they have a future. Democracies need to continue to make the case that they are the better

systems of government. The proof is not just in their performance, but in their continued commitment to the core values of freedom, justice and equality that underlie the idea of self-government (Almond and Verba 1963; Dahl 1998). In this sense, the values of democracy are not simply pluralistic and competitive, as claimed by liberals, but are based on a core of shared beliefs or foundational principles that are inscribed in constitutions and take different institutional forms (such as citizenship). This raises the question of whether there is an ideological basis for democracy or, in other words, what sustains the system of beliefs and justifications that belong to democracy and makes it credible and normatively desirable in the eyes of the many.

The picture is complicated by the evidence of contemporary disruptions of democracy. Rather than consolidating, existing democracies are increasingly being shattered by new value and identity conflicts (Norris and Inglehart 2019). Instead of a widening consensus about core democratic values in Western democracies, we observe the intensification of value polarisation (Eigmüller and Trenz 2020). Adherence to values, more than ideologies, seem to divide populations with the risk of radicalisation of conflict when polarised groups within and between societies become adversaries. Deep clashes of values thus point to more radical manifestations of conflict, which, unlike old ideological divides, make reconciliation or compromise increasingly unlikely. In light of these contrasting experiences, I ask: How can we explain the new salience of value conflicts in democracy despite the postulated end of ideologies? What, if anything distinguishes the new salience of value conflicts from old ideological polarisations? Rather than the victory of democracy, the absence of ideological polarisation and the end of the left-right divide has been discussed as an indicator of a deep crisis of democracies, a 'void' being filled by new identitarian movements (Mair 2013). Drawing on some empirical examples of social media polarisations around fundamental values, I will argue that such identity conflicts between polarised groups (e.g. liberals versus anti-liberals) should be understood as a continuation, rather than a discontinuity, of old ideological cleavages. As such, they can be interpreted as disruptions or disconfigurations of existing democracy (Urbinati 2014) but not as heralding a new age of post-democracy.

2. The end of ideologies and the age of democracy

Democracies cannot be classified (and sometimes even ranked) without reference to their underlying core values and principles. Democratic values refer to standards or rules of behaviour that are generally accepted and considered valid and desirable, and that a government must adhere to in order to be classified as democratic. These include in the most basic sense freedom, equality and the rule of law, and derived principles such as free speech, gender equality and independence of the judiciary. The exact list of these values that distinguish democracies is open, although national constitutions as well as international organisations such as the UN have attempted to classify them, starting with the 1948 International Declaration of Human Rights and continuing with efforts to agree on universal principles, norms and standards and to establish an effective and acceptable universal framework for their protection (Spijkers 2012). The European Union is also based on a reference to core democratic values, the so-called "values of the Union", including "respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights". Even within the framework of national constitutions, the fundamental rights derived from such values often apply not only to citizens but, as in the case of the "Grundrechte" in the German Basic Law, to all human beings. If democratic values can claim universal validity, it follows that the protection of democratic values is not only the responsibility of individual democratic nation-states, but is also regarded as an international task, and that sanctions imposed by the international community for violations of democratic rules by certain states are regarded as legitimate.

A classification of core democratic principles that distinguishes democracies from other regimes of government paves the way for analytical political science to develop various empirical tools for the comparative measurement of democratic qualities (Morlino 2012). The emphasis of democratic quality assessment thus shifts from the validation of principles to performance. However, one remaining problem with

the classification of core democratic values is that the same value can be considered valid in a non-democratic context. What distinguishes the values of democracies is not the substance or core content of the value as such, but the moral justification attached to it. Democratic values always exist in the plural, and the way in which they are applied must be determined in relation to each other by the members of the community who claim their validity (Habermas 1996). Justice does not exist in the abstract, but must be balanced against all other values, such as freedom and equality, that can legitimately claim validity. This includes the possibility of value conflict in the sense of competing moral justifications or divergent preferences of different groups or parties that make up democracy. There is no intrinsic democratic value, but it is only the process of justification that makes it democratic, leaving any moral justification of values open to public contestation. For example, justice may be more effectively promoted by religions, but we would not consider the grounding of justice claims in the will of God to be a democratic mode of justification if it did not also provide for the possibility of God's will being contested.

One might be tempted to conclude that this principled openness to competing moral justifications and universal reasoning is what distinguishes democratic values from political ideologies. Ideologies are built around pre-determined value preferences that claim the priority of certain values over others and often resolve potential conflicts in a dogmatic way. If value preferences have to be constantly justified in open procedures of democratic deliberation and critique, new ideologies will find it difficult to take hold and old ideologies will find it difficult to persist. Because ideologies are always to be seen as culturally bounded and constrained by the political parties or states that protect them, they are also easily debunked as 'false consciousness'. They cannot escape rationalisation, while at the same time they are constantly suspected of being irrational. Ideologies also have a difficult time in the pluralistic media landscapes of advanced democracies. Especially with the end of the partisan press, ideologies were deprived of their primary means of promotion. The globalised private press has tended to avoid ideological positioning and, through the pluralisation of content and opinion, has further undermined the ideological base of national state-based democracies. One could argue that the end of ideologies is already built into the communication and market infrastructures of plural democracies. There is no place for ideological dogma in the ever-changing plural and diverse media markets of advanced capitalism. Ideologies become mere passing fashions or moods, and precisely because attention is constantly shifting, the former constituency of ideological believers becomes a transient audience, convinced of the value of an argument only for the brief period when no better argument comes to their attention. In a sense, globalised attention markets invite deliberation and responsiveness by constantly exposing plural arguments to critique. What is argued for today must be constantly adapted and reformulated in order to be heard tomorrow.

Where reasoning unfolds, ideologies play the main role in organising political discourse by consolidating value preferences and translating them into political programmes. Increased value contestation requires ideological underpinning, even if such ideologies are no longer sedimented in complex systems of thought. We may not see them in the confused struggle over values. Ideologies are therefore not simply irrational, but bound to public reason, with a capacity to adapt and respond to criticism (as best illustrated by the development of Marxist thought). This is also consistent with the historical role of ideologies in the Marxist and liberal traditions: both were conceived by their proponents as a systematic approach to rationalising politics in line with the progress of science and against the prejudices of religion and tradition (Schnädelbach 1968). In the tradition of Saint-Simon, ideology thus worked in conjunction with sociology: In order to build an effective society and economy, the needs of the people also had to be identified in an objective way. This devotion to the scientific method in the development of ideological thought left a deep mark on political theory and is still used today as an argument to disqualify prejudice within ideology. It has been argued, for example, that racism should not be called a political ideology precisely because it systematically violates evidence and rejects rational reasoning in favour of playing on the ignorance of blind adherents (Mueller 2020).

The claim to universal validity is therefore common to the defence of both values and ideologies and helps to explain their intrinsic relationship. The public legitimation of democracy as a new type of political regime requires a justification that distinguishes all cases of democracy from other regimes of political order. Such a universalising principle can be found in the reference to democratic values and the set of fundamental rights derived from them. Ideologies, too, will be built in different ways around such universal value references, without necessarily being classified as democratic. For example, pacifism could be identified as an ideology that focuses on the defence of the universal value of peace as the primary goal of a political order, without assuming that an orientation towards peace is necessarily characteristic of a democratic order. Socialism will place a strong emphasis on social justice and equality but may support a political regime that seriously undermines freedom and personal autonomy. This implies that democracy should not be seen as an ideology, as has sometimes been suggested (Canfora and Jones 2008; Williams 1961). You need a suffix like liberal democracy or social democracy to make a partisan connection with political beliefs, for example in the creative power of individual autonomy or the collective strength of the community. Democracies are tolerant of such different worldviews and even encourage the competition of ideas. They recognise a principled equivalence of core universal values and thus institutionalise value conflict. Such conflicts may crystallise in preferences for the expression of some values in particular democratic regimes, but such priorities, for example for social justice or personal autonomy, are established without undermining the validity of any other value. The permanent dominance of one value over others, or the non-recognition of its principled validity, would disqualify a democratic order. The core democratic values of justice, freedom or personal autonomy inform political ideologies such as socialism or liberalism, but at the same time exist independently of their ideological expressions as part of a universal regime of justification. Even core liberalists cannot deny the validity of social justice claims in a democracy, just as social justice claims can be made in the name of religion.

However, the claim to universality should not be confused with de facto globalism. Modern political ideologies are of European origin and have spread mainly within the European political space (White 2020). The post-ideological critique of values is based above all on this exposure of the false universalism of ideologies and, by extension, of the order of values they represent. This presupposes that if ideologies are successfully exposed for their de facto non-universality, the universalism of their underlying values will also collapse. Such a critique of universalism fails to recognise the difference between the regimes of justification established by argumentative references to values and to ideologies (Habermas 2003).

While recognising that a discussion of ideologies and democratic values needs to be kept separate, despite their similarities in claiming universal validity, the question is how to relate ideologies and democratic values. A simple distinction would be to keep them at different levels of abstraction, with values as the most general reference to what is considered valuable or desirable for the community, and ideologies as a more systematically developed system of thought about how to achieve desirable goals. Values are simply references to worth, whereas ideologies contain diagnosis and prescription. Ideologies would thus build on references to values by contextualising them in a general programme for their implementation and dissemination. Ideologies would be programmes for the realisation of values. This implies that while ideologies cannot exist without reference to values, we can well conceive of values without ideologies. As the most general reference to worth, values can always claim equal status in relation to each other, which makes any conflict of values irresolvable. At the same time, however, the equivalence of democratic values cannot be transformed into an order that pays equal respect to all values. Value conflicts are therefore intrinsic to democracy (Olsen 2019). Plurality of values implies choices about preferences, e.g. whether social justice is more urgent than personal autonomy. A liberal has no reason to dispute the validity of the value of equality, only the means of achieving it in relation to other values. Rather than a direct confrontation of values, therefore, democracies are built on ideological divisions between partisan actors who express different preferences about the relationships between values. In this sense, ideologies are a sedimented conflict of values that provide temporary solutions to how intrinsic conflicts of values (e.g. between freedom and equality) can be resolved.

Another way of relating ideologies and values is to understand them as different regimes of justification. Political ideologies, like democratic values, are associated with the Enlightenment tradition as the age of reason through which people can not only understand the world but also work to improve it. However, there is an inbuilt tension between values and ideologies in the intellectual movements of the Enlightenment, which sought to rationalise values while at the same time exposing ideologies as 'false consciousness'. The justification of democratic values unfolds a universalising force of argumentation. The claimed worth of values applies to all cases: I cannot argue that justice should be established in some cases and not in others. At the same time, the arguments put forward in defence of values must remain open in principle. Every human encounter is also an encounter with other arguments that invite me to revise my factual or moral judgements and that may change my value preferences. Ideologies, in turn, seek to persuade and impose their ideas on others. This is why, ideologies, according to Max Weber, are generally political and power-oriented (Weber 1922: 214). As such, they are partisan, needed by political parties to position themselves in the struggle for power. Unlike democratic values that apply to all cases, ideologies are often used to identify particular groups as supporters of particular political ideas. Ideologies define collectives, first social classes and later social movements. Weber also observed a hierarchy among those who formulate ideologies and ensure their purity and dissemination, which is typically in the hands of leaders with procedures for acclamation. Being partisan does not mean that ideological ideas were not also meant to travel across cultures and space. To the contrary, ideologies were formulated for export by intellectuals throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century. To facilitate diffusion, ideologies, unlike other cultural forms such as rituals, are easily translated and based on ideas that travel well. The elements that make ideologies translatable and transferable are precisely the built-in references to universal values.

Ideologies are semi-closed systems of thought that build on argumentation while at the same time restricting it in specific ways. Argumentation stops when core postulates are questioned, without which the consistency of the established system of thought would fall apart. Ideologies would thus be different from values because of this built-in mechanism of self-protection. Instead of principled openness to new arguments, ideologies rely on closure and are, in fact, often highly controlled by the defenders of ideological purity of thought. Intellectuals who defend ideologies must be prepared to fight. Values, instead, may be incompatible, but this incompatibility need not manifest itself in conflict. On the contrary, it is precisely because values are recognised as universal that they seek reconciliation. This is definitely not the case with ideologies, which are often formulated as opposing programmes: no ideology without a counter-ideology. While values are not intrusive, ideologies aim at effect. They are not simply formulated as the correct insight or as proven knowledge, but as a tool to convince or impress the audience and to win the dispute and the political struggle (Schnädelbach 1968: 203).

The end of ideologies is often discussed in relation to the crisis of state-based national democracies, to which they have been seen as inextricably linked. This assumption of a distinction between universal values and culturally and geographically bounded ideologies is misleading. Historically, ideologies in Europe came with states but never remained within states. They claimed universal validity, which in the context of European modernity meant first and foremost that all the isms of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, from romanticism to nationalism to socialism, were to a large extent Europeanised (White 2020).

The emergence of ideologies is inseparable from the emergence of the modern state, as White (2020: 1291) observes, but it would be even more accurate to say that ideologies co-evolved with the emergence of the modern public sphere. The principle of publicity not only encouraged the articulation of political thought, but also facilitated its successful dissemination. On the one hand, the public sphere stimulated a systematic approach to political ideas in relation to the rules of the social (Polanyi 1957). The new political writings of journalists, philosophers and public intellectuals (not coincidentally, Marx was all of these) had to be condensed and given a narrative form. Liberals and socialists synthesised and unified their ideas into a coherent system of thought that could be disseminated through the means of mass communication. As such, they

populated the bourgeois public sphere with complementary and not necessarily antagonistic accounts of the political self-organisation of society (Habermas 1991).[1] This principled openness of the public sphere also explains the transnational diffusion of ideologies, which did not occur at a later stage in the development of ideological thought, but simultaneously with the early expressions of new political ideas (White 2020).

On the other hand, the public sphere became a marketplace for ideas, and thus for ideologies, with publicity standards increasingly measured in terms of the persuasiveness of arguments. Publicity allowed ideologues to look smart and become popular. It meant that ideologies had to be built and promoted like a brand in order to survive in the attention market of the mass media. This became a challenge for the public sphere, as the hegemony of closed systems of thought threatened to undermine the principled openness of public communication. In the democratic public sphere, the encounter between ideologies was supposed to be epistemic rather than competitive. For the mass media, this meant that ideological positions had to be mediated and not polarised. In the ideological public sphere, however, political ideologies became hegemonic projects for strategic communication by organised actors who made categorical claims to validity and positioned themselves in antagonistic terms. This was accompanied by a redefinition of the role of the media in democracy, no longer as a battleground of ideas, but as an amplifier of polarised positions in society. The antagonistic media followed a commercial logic in the way they positioned all expressions of political opinion as part of a branded ideology. The ideological public sphere was both integrating and polarising in the way it condensed plural positions and helped audiences to distinguish popular hegemonic projects and the roadmap for their (not so dynamic) interplay (Sevignani 2021). In such a commercialised media system, ideologies no longer needed to travel across cultures because the antagonism they represented worked best in culturally and nationally confined political spaces. In the last part of this essay, I will try to understand how contemporary digital transformations of the public sphere are fundamentally challenging the ideological constellation of mass-mediated democracies, but not, as is often claimed, leading to the end of ideologies, but rather fostering the expression of new popular and populist ideological beliefs (Habermas 2022; Sevignani 2021).

3. Did the post-ideological age introduce a new golden age of democracy?

The age of ideologies is inextricably linked to the age of representative democracy, which "reveals the 'miraculous work' of ideological narratives" in holding the electorate together. In a representative democracy, every vote refers to established beliefs, whereas in a direct democracy "every vote is a new beginning" (Urbinati 2006: 32). The same can be said of discursive notions of democracy based on the free exchange of arguments among equals who participate in the formation of public opinion and the collective will that informs government (Habermas 1996). The democratic legitimacy of deliberative processes is measured not by how well they represent existing belief systems in society or by their affirmation of pre-established values, but by their reasonable outcomes and the recognition of value pluralism in an open exchange of arguments (Cohen 1997). Ideologies need political representation in order to establish and expand over time as belief systems that gain visibility and are recognised as belonging to a particular group of people. As such, they are part of the pluralistic design of interest representation and value preferences that informs democracy, but the way in which they claim authority and are often resistant to argumentative reasoning is not necessarily democratic. When embedded in democracies, ideologies must pay the price of allowing for adaptation and change in their beliefs. The encounter between ideological argument and democratic procedures of justification is never

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[1] This leaves open the question of whether the bourgeois public sphere itself should be seen as an ideological disposition in the sense of Gramsci or Stuart Hall, something implicit in Habermas's early formulation of the emergence of bourgeois publics, but later abandoned when the public sphere was needed as a space for the generation of communicative power through the rationalisation of arguments (Sevignani 2021).

without tension. Such tensions are not necessarily harmful to democracy; rather, their management and possible solutions should be seen as part of democratic pluralism, openness and tolerance towards others.

The openness of democratic deliberation often performed as a critique of ideology, i.e. a rejection of belief and prejudice. A critique of ideology, in the tradition of Marx, leads to historical knowledge as opposed to 'false consciousness'. This supposed privilege of the Marxist intellectual to perform ideological critique was soon replaced by the sociologist's discovery of the dependence of any kind of knowledge on social reality (Mannheim 2013). With the spread of sociological knowledge, the exposure of ideological thinking against historical truth became a politically impossible task, since such a critique of ideology could only be performed as a counter-ideology. In representative democracy there was no escape from ideology. Democratic deliberation offered such an escape, while at the same time embracing the basic sociological insight of the social construction of knowledge (Thompson and Bell 2006). Ideological critique was fully democratised and even redefined as a form of civic engagement to be exercised as part of democratic citizenship. This was the age of democracy, which learned to play with ideologies, not to overcome them with a higher rationality, but to accept them as possible approaches to knowledge, while at the same time constantly challenging them with the force of the better argument. The open democratic process was the key to the rationalisation of democracy, where claims to validity always had to withstand empirical scrutiny and respond to universal reasoning. The standards of ideological critique were defined by the rules of the procedures of democratic will formation. It was here that democracy inevitably had to turn to the validity of universal values, which were needed as a constitutional underpinning for the established procedures of democratic will formation. What makes these values democratic is that they are always plural and in need of balancing, which in turn requires collective engagement in democratic deliberation. Ideology is then not completely replaced by communicative rationality, as has sometimes been claimed (Joseph 2004), but allows certain positions to seek temporary alliances with power and domination.

The critique of ideology through universal reasoning also had geopolitical implications in the way it challenged the legitimacy of the nation-state and called for a post-national reorganisation of democracy, either in the form of local and regional self-government or in the form of supranational (European) integration. The democratic choice of values rather than ideologies was coupled with a new notion of political space, as democratic values transcended the national, where old ideologies were rooted. If national politics was seen as ideological, the new political space of values belonged to the transnational; it was a common space of democratically minded citizens, a space of humanity that adhered to universal human rights and rationality. The need to define such a new political space was very much at the heart of the project of European integration, which for several decades was to be built on a consensus of values, defining core values that could at the same time claim universal validity (Eriksen 2007). The liberation of Europe from ideologies was a project of peace and consensus-building about what Europeans have in common and should strive for together. As historians of European integration will tell you, the post-ideological understanding is deeply rooted in the history of the idea of European unification. The European Communities were founded against ideologies, with the primary aim of refuting the isms of the past (Dinan 2004; Schulz-Forberg and Stråth 2010). At the same time, Europe could not escape ideologies and to some extent even redefined them by promoting liberal democracy as the engine of prosperity, peace and individual well-being. Deeply committed to the ideal of human progress through the Enlightenment, the European integration project, in order to defend its underlying moral choices, inevitably had to refer to universal values. The idea of the European Union as a community of values could then be used to mark out a political space that was more than just a market or a community of interests.

The assumption that Western politics had witnessed the 'end of ideology' actually predates the fall of the Iron Curtain and the ideologically divided world of 1989 and refers to the sociological diagnosis of open societies characterised by secularisation, individualisation and increased reflexivity, in which collective projects had lost their lustre (Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994). Liberal democracy spread precisely because it did not require collective ideological commitments and allowed for the establishment of a kind of technocratic

government with an emphasis on politics as 'problem-solving' (Giddens 1994). From a sociological angle, the post-ideological age is also the age of singularisation (Reckwitz 2020). With the end of ideologies comes the end of the collective. In a liberal democracy, it is no longer necessary to mobilise the masses, but to convince the individual. There has been an automatism in the way democracies have developed with the expansion of capitalist markets, embracing both materialist (consumption) and post-materialist (self-realisation) values, with states and democratic government fulfilling the main function of guarantor of individual rights, freedom and security instead of collective empowerment. The end of ideologies would thus accelerate the return to the values needed to promote individual life choices through advertising and consumption. As critical observers soon warned, the 'neglect of the collective' itself turned out to be 'ideological' in the way it was promoted by some of the hardliners of neoliberal thought (Biebricher 2018; Dean 2014). In parallel, collectives began to be reshaped in the post '89 counterrevolutions and the search for new expressions of popular sovereignty in the form of ethno-nationalism and populism (Snyder 2003; Wodak and Boukala 2015; Zielonka 2018).

4. (Post) democracy and the return of ideologies

The question of what happens to ideology in the face of the diagnosis of democratic failure or post-democracy is rarely asked. Most authors diagnosing post-democracy would implicitly assume that the post-democratic age is also devoid of ideologies, precisely because technocratic governance has replaced democratic government (Mair 2013). Assuming that the end of ideologies in the mass societies of the 1960s and 1970s ushered in a new age of democracy, one would expect the crisis of democracy that has been diagnosed since the early 2000s to be accompanied by a return of ideology. However, such a possibility of a return of ideologies is almost unanimously dismissed in the existing literature on the grounds that ideologies were supposedly dead before democracy. If the death of ideologies precedes the death of democracy, there can be no return of ideologies in post-democracy. Rather, the most perceptive observers of a crisis of democracy, such as Peter Mair (2013) or Colin Crouch (2004), agree that the dysfunction of representative democracy is linked to the erosion of the ideological distinctiveness of political parties. As the era of party politics comes to an end, new clientelist parties are taking its place, whose primary concern is the establishment of a technocratic regime of government. The 'void' of political representation (Mair 2013) is instead increasingly occupied by new identitarian or populist movements, which further erode the system of representative democracy. This is confirmed by Jan Zielonka (2018), who sees democracy being crushed to death by neoliberalism on the one hand and populism on the other in the 'new politics of extremes'. The diagnosis that identity politics is replacing the old ideological partisan divides is supported by numerous studies on cleavages in voting behaviour and political attitudes (Grande and Kriesi 2014; Hooghe and Marks 2018; Norris and Inglehart 2019; de Wilde et al. 2019). The 'end of ideologies' in the form of old partisan cleavages thus adds fuel to the diagnosis of post-democracy, while new populist, identitarian and charismatic-authoritarian movements are not seen as ideological (Muller 2011; Zielonka 2018).

In much of this literature, which links post-democracy with the end of ideology, a classical vision of ideology as *Weltanschauung*, a world-encompassing view, still prevails, which has been rendered obsolete by the postmodern embrace of difference. What kind of world order would be possible if the post-democratic age continues to be a post-ideological age? A world without democracy and ideologies would be feasible if those in power no longer needed to justify their worldview or moral reasoning, but could simply play pragmatic power games. But how plausible is the assumption that, for example, the new relationship between the superpowers, especially the US and China, would simply be dictated by competition for world market supremacy? How feasible is the offensive realism of the Chinese regime, which is supposed to bring us back from heaven to earth by promoting purely strategic thinking and investing little or nothing in promoting ideological thinking, either internally or internationally (Acharya 2019)?

With the age of ideologies being replaced by either market or identity politics, there is a conspicuous reluctance to call either neoliberalism or populism an ideology. Neoliberalism is said to be devoid of ideologies, both by its 'ideologists' like Hayek, who present it as an economic method, and by its critics, who

wish to maintain a distinction between neoliberalism and political ideologies. The same goes for populism, which, according to some, is not an ideology, or, at best, should be understood as a thin-centred ideology (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2023), i a political style (Moffitt 2016), a technique of seeking power (Norris 2020), an ideological corruption of democracy (Taguieff 1997) or as a mentality.. This reluctance on the part of intellectuals and political activists alike to label the key ideologies of our time as ideological is symptomatic. Yet neither neoliberals nor populists want to end democracy. The former want to increase the openness and freedom of the individual as a market citizen; the latter want to regain control over the collective and strengthen the popular sovereignty of national citizens and their exclusive belonging to limited nation-states. If the end of democracy is not wanted, why is it happening? Or is it simply not happening, signalling that the current political struggle for democracy is just another form of democratic renewal? The 'new politics of extremes' is also a politics of non-reconciliation and polarisation, characterised by a loss of respect and trust between political opponents who perceive each other as enemies rather than legitimate combatants. Liberals would see the end of democracy as the victory of populists; populists would see the end of democracy as the victory of liberals. The two projects have become exclusive and incommensurable. A strong ideological polarisation has returned, and democracy is caught between hyper-individualism and hyper-collectivism. Given this ambiguity, it is indeed useful to ask: How is the current political struggle over democracy related to ideologies? What, if anything, are the ideologies of post-democracy? The answer, as I will argue below, lies in the complex relationships between core democratic values and ideologies.

5. From enhanced value conflicts back to ideologies

The end of ideologies, as proclaimed by sociologists since the 1960s, was never meant to be purely diagnostic. It also reflected a state of mind among democratic citizens, especially in the Western hemisphere, who had grown up with the idea that ideologies were to be regarded as a remnant of the past. Ideologies as imposed systems of political thought belonged to the first modernity. In reflexive modernity, the quest to overcome ideologies became part of political socialisation and education programmes that propagated the new ideal of participatory and emancipated citizenship (Beck et al. 1994; Roche 1992). The new prominence of values in the discourse of political legitimation is consistent with these ideals of personal autonomy and self-determination. References to core democratic values are the residue that remains when one begins to deconstruct ideologies. Values do not reflect class interests, but require individual choice and are tolerant of changing voter preferences. The idea, in short, is that the identification with values works in a 'democratic way', taking into account diversity, individual lifestyles and plural forms of self-realisation.

The popularity of the choice of values as a means of self-expression and self-representation is certainly linked to the possibilities offered by new media and new user-driven forms of communication, where everyone's entitled to their own opinion (Castells 2008). For cyber-optimists, the digital transformations point to social progress and democratic emancipation: by overcoming the ideological public sphere of the mass media, the diversified and multidirectional communication flows of the digital public sphere would indeed support the hypothesis of the demise of ideologies (Trenz 2023). However, the new media are not only a place for individual self-expression through values, but also open up new dynamics of user-driven value conflicts. In particular, with the erosion of the gatekeeper function of journalism, claims about the truth and validity of ideological beliefs are no longer decided with the authority of the public, but are reprivatised and left to everyone's arbitrary decision (Xu, Zhou, and Wang 2023). Dis-intermediation is a chance (Sevignani 2021: 59) for all kinds of alternative voices to gain prominence, and a popular way to gain such prominence is through heightened value conflicts. The paradox is that in the absence of antagonistic mass media to filter news content and debate, the risk of value conflicts actually increases. It is precisely because ideological polarisation has collapsed that people are mobilising around values, only that in the new radicalised battlefield of reprivatised value conflicts, the combatants and their opponents are constantly shifting coalitions, and mediators who seek compromises between competing positions or encourage conflict partners to seek understanding are largely absent.

It is worth recalling here that ideologies also serve as collective signifiers of groups as political agents (Laclau and Mouffe 1985), and in this function they may still be important for the self-representation and attribution of groups of political opinion-formers, for example in social media, even if such groups have nothing more in common than some diffuse ideas that they share with others. Ideologies are 'habitual forms of self-definition' (White 2020: 1292 but they are also used by others to label groups whose opinions are perceived as different. As such, they persist as structuring devices of political discourse well beyond the death pronounced by political theorists. This idea of ideologies as collective signifiers for assigning political positions also explains a persistent finding in political polarisation research that democratic citizens often believe in the polarisation of opinion, even though opinion polls or focus group methods show that their support of core democratic values is firm and their attitudes towards the most controversial issues, such as migration or gender diversity, tend to converge (Mau, Lux, and Westheuser 2023).

With the new salience of value conflicts, the European political space becomes ideological again in the basic sense that the contestants can be identified as collectives with distinct attitudes and opinions on key questions of future-oriented political choices. Unlike the old ideological battles between left and right, value conflicts are explicitly about the identification of the morally upright community. Positioning in value conflicts is not just partisan; it means standing on the right side of history and defending choices that are fundamental to the well-being of humanity. The validity of core democratic values is not to be questioned, and conflicts are still unfolding over how to apply the principle of freedom during the pandemic, how to promote the new eco-social deal for a sustainable future, or how to translate the principle of gender equality into concrete rights and responsibilities. All the indicators suggest that such conflicts of values are once again turning the European political space into an arena of ideological contestation, and that the Europe of values is far from being a post-ideology.

Ideologies in this broad sense of collective signifiers of opinion and political choices play a different role in democratic politics than ideologies as programmatic scripts for future orientations. As such, they are no longer primarily a structuring element of national political spaces and party competition, but are increasingly used to demarcate spaces of democracy, especially, when confronted with technocracy as a space with no alternative choices. The question is not how democracies can be internally diversified according to different value attachments, but how they can be distinguished from non-democracies. Such non-democracies are not necessarily external in the form of new authoritarian regimes, but can be found in all kinds of practices by individuals, groups or political parties that are seen as deviating from democratic norms. For example, anti-vaccination activists are not simply identified as a threat to public health, but are accused of adhering to authoritarian values as expressed in their voting behaviour for extremist parties. So-called authoritarians, in turn, will also reclaim democracy in their attachment to values, for example by promoting an anti-gender or anti-immigration discourse. Such shifts in opinion allow for more flexible and often transnational coalition building, for example between anti-immigrant and pro-gender groups. Ideological expressions derived from different value attachments are often ad hoc and without intellectual underpinning. Nevertheless, they allow individuals to position themselves in ongoing public debates without necessarily being constrained by systems of thought that would require them to defend the same position the next day. The cycle of attention may shift, but still the same group of people who defended anti-vaccine opinions during the pandemic will find themselves together the next day to support Putin's invasion of Ukraine as a legitimate act of defence against NATO.

Ideologies, as movements of opinion, rely on a global media infrastructure for their dissemination. This gives new impetus to the transnationalisation of ideological thought in a social media space that, far from being post-ideological, is constantly providing new ideological mashups, for instance, in the contestation of gender, of public health (as during the pandemic), or most recently of international security The idea that ideologies were a hallmark of national politics and that the transnational or European political space could be conceived as post-ideological, liberated from the isms of the past, has always been deceptive. European unification was

driven by this impulse to overcome ideologies, but it also built on a transnational ideological superstructure of the past, 'a hinterland of pan-European ideological politics', as Jonathan White has called it (White 2020: 1294).

With the new fabrics of mashup ideologies in the political space of social media, so-called conspiracy theories can play a powerful role (Sutton and Douglas 2020). The answer to the question of whether conspiracy beliefs can be considered ideological is affirmative, given the above definition of ideologies as organising devices in public debates. As 'false consciousness', conspiracy beliefs have an affinity with fascism in that 'they use a particular form of the friend/ enemy scheme that is combined with superstitious and mystical belief in the existence of a secret enemy who exerts a hidden plan of domination' (Fuchs 2021: 70). More generally, conspiracies respond to the need for ideological orientation in public debates characterised by high levels of uncertainty. Similar to the old function of ideologies, they enable us to see things more clearly and offer simple schemes for interpreting the world in a collectively binding way. However, the answer to the question of whether conspiracies should be considered as ideologies should be 'no', if one follows the classical Western (and predominantly Marxist) understanding of ideologies as a form of social critique. The prerequisites of critique are that our cognitive understanding of social reality and our approach to truth are error-prone and always under suspicion of being 'false consciousness' (Schnädelbach 1968: 73). From such a critical understanding, conspiracies are regressive forms of social consciousness, more akin in their effects to a mass psychosis that certainly does not expand the space of reasoning, but rather suspends or suppresses it in specific ways (Aupers 2012). The rupture with reason also marks the end of ideologies. While the latter remain attached to the tradition of the Western Enlightenment, conspiracies emerge from the anti-pluralistic unification of political thought by authoritarian forces and their attempts to strategically place lies in public debates (van Dyk 2022). As such, they are divorced from criticism and intended only to be applauded by their adherents, who celebrate themselves as defenders of truth in closed social media spaces.

The return of ideologies in the age of post-democracy would therefore be misunderstood if its manifestations were discussed simply in terms of regressive movements, populist mobilisations or authoritarian backlashes. Ideologies remain tied to democratic spaces where ideas and values can compete and struggle to become real. The great challenge to democracy is not autocracy, which is never sufficient in itself as a legitimate form of government, but technocracy, which marginalises human choice and agency. The post-truth politics promoted by the new authoritarian leaders may therefore be only one side of the ideological battles for the future of democracy that are being fought over human agency and reason, for example in reclaiming democratic control over algorithms and artificial intelligence, or in combating climate change against the imperatives of markets and economic growth. These are debates that require choices about questions of justice, redistribution and recognition to which ideologies provide adequate answers.

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