**Political ideologies and social imaginaries**

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***Abstract:*** *Political Ideologies are under debate since they were formed in social history, and to understand modern political life we must still pay attention to them. If Political Ideologies seems to be the major type of representation that people have to move themselves in political spectrum, I intend to demonstrate that we are witnessing their weakness to provide the needed meaning and to understand our political choices.*

*Dealing with this problematic view, could be helpful to recover the category of social imaginary to enlighten a more adequate comprehension of the phenomenon. Our thesis is that our social imaginary is becoming increasingly fragmented due to the lack of meaning that Political Ideologies once had but it is no longer recognizable in our daily political choices. On the other hand, the cosmopolitical appeal of globalisation does not yet provide a global social imaginary that could be recognizable beyond the scope of a post-ideology era, and, as so, presented itself as fragmented as the former. New social imaginaries are needed to overcome this fragmentation.*

***Keywords:*** *political ideologies, social imaginary, democracy, identity*

1. **Political Ideologies in question**

In social studies, a political ideology is a certain set of ethical ideals, principles, doctrines, myths or symbols of a social movement, institution, class or large group that explains how society should work and offers some political and cultural blueprint for a certain social order. Thus, ideologies offer an explanation of the prevailing order, develop a model of the future that is desirable in the idea of an “ideal society” and explain how this end can be realized by the society in question.

Schematically we may point out some functions that a political ideology exercises to give meaning to a social order. They provide comprehensiveness – not only of an ideal, but the needed transformation of society to accomplish the full realization of the ideal; a stable system of ideas – regarding the 'isms' - as a configuration ideas and attitudes in which the elements are bound together by functional interdependence; sharedness and identity – between the ideological primary group, social movements, classes or parties; way of translating ideas into action and mobilization - they give general and specific directives for action.

A political ideology largely concerns itself with how to allocate power and to what ends it should be used. Political ideologies have two dimensions: (1) goals: how society should be organized; and (2) methods: the most appropriate way to achieve this goal.

As a system of thinking oriented towards the action, political ideologies are inclusive, they fit to all of the "isms".

In the modern constitutional scenery, that is, in the post-French revolution and the establishment of constitutional regimes, the “isms” associated with political ideologies appear, such as liberalism, conservatism and socialism. Of course, in the United States of America in which liberals continue to be on the left and conservatives on the right (as is their practice), because in this territory socialism or communism never took hold and therefore liberalism has never been displaced, but those are particular ideologies.

Liberalism, conservatism, socialism or even populism are particular ideologies has they differ from a total ideology. A total ideology, or Weltanschauung (worldview) in comparison, is a comprehensive belief about ultimate questions and consequently less vulnerable to relativities. Ideologies such as humanism or theism could be seen as total ideologies, and they are resistant to critical examination. Total ideologies are a matter of beliefs about the world, not empirical constructs about this or that in the world. Total worldviews can survive doubt and adverse experience, but particular ideologies cannot. Particular ideologies, on the other hand, are theorical constructs about this or that world, subject to empirical verification, space and time located, subject to modifications, variations, and deviations, and, as so, vulnerable to critical examination.

Since they are subject to critical examination, we may question: Does political ideology cease to have a place in a post-modern and globalized world, which has social fragmentation as its characteristics?

**2. The end of ideologies thesis**

Western neo-liberal Democracies are often and shortly characterized by having a representative procedure of participation in the public sphere of life, determining a self-rule form of political regime, affirming the sovereignty of the people in a specific territory; an economic welfare system; political institutions that administrate and organize public life on the basis of their citizens’ confidence; public security and order. This instrumental approach to the definition of Democracy, characteristically of a capitalist society, as it was put forward by Joseph A. Schumpeter, means that «the role of the people is to produce a government, or else an intermediate body which in turn will produce a national executive or government. And we define: the democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote» ([1942]; 2003: p. 269).

In a democratic neo liberal context, one of the most important aspects that keeps people living together without major conflicts among themselves is economic security, that is, the means to pursue their interests and to flourish by achieving their personal or communal objectives and living a meaning and fruitful live. That implies having the opportunities to climb up the social ladder; to access better jobs and functions available in society and to benefit from a fair social welfare system, which is presented as one of the most important conquests in the outcome of World War II, as well as higher degrees of industrialization and consequent economic development, that specially contributed to the pacification not only between societies, but also among citizens.

Combined, equality in political liberty and economic security are the foremost characteristics that endorse the importance of National States in the shaping of modern societies in the second half of the 20th Century, yet that has not prevented the rise of other kind of problems and challenges to the spread of democracy worldwide. Not only at a political level but specially on moral grounds since a State is not only a political entity, but also a National one.

The justification for it relies on the fact that, as societies become more complex and people’s relations and interactions increase and become more intricated, so does the bureaucratic level of administration, as well as the level of expertise to deal with such a complex way of political organization. As a result, professional politicians are required to do the job and those politicians, from top to bottom, do not recognize the ability of an average citizen to address such complicated social matters. This depoliticization increases the feeling that we are faced with what Daniel Bell has called the End of Ideology.

The End of Ideology thesis, put forward by Daniel Bell sustains that ideological differences will became more restricted as nations experience social modernization (Dalton, 2005). Considering that the main objective of any government is to generate the resources to respond to the most important social needs: provide economic wealth and security. Considering, also, that the increasing complexity of a developed industrial society leads to the formation of a more differentiated social structures, with more complex patterns of social and economic relations and with more interactions between members of the same political community, the ideals of traditional political ideologies may be conceived as already accomplishes. A second element of Bell's thesis is that modern societies are increasingly secular. A trend that diminishes the moral content of the political debate. Furthermore, he argues that, traditionally, political ideologies have had to compete with religion for public support. As religious attachments were moderated, so too could emotional attachments to a political position be moderated. Religion remains an important element in many Western democracies, but its influence has diminished as a consequence of social modernization, the same logic of that argument may be applied to political ideologies.

As Bell suggested, social modernization does seem to transform the extent and bases of ideological polarization within contemporary societies. «In the Western world, therefore, there is a rough consensus among intellectuals on political issues: the acceptance of a Welfare State; the desirability of decentralized power; a system of mixed economy and of political pluralism. In that sense, too, the ideological age has ended» (Bell, 1960, p. 373). The apparent erosion of class clashes in Western democracies and the emergence of a consensus in support of the welfare state have been taken as indicators of the erosion of traditional ideological divisions. As so, ideology had ended!

In his commentary on the End of Ideology (2000), Bell argues that ethnic and linguistic cleavages are strengthening in the developing world, providing a new basis for division – even if these divisions are not fully expressed in a broader worldwide view or ideology. Those different sets of ideology may explain why developing societies are so polarised, given that political orientations are now also shaped by moral issues and national identity. This pattern also suggests that these divisions will be more difficult to manage than economic competition in advanced industrial democracies (Dalton, 2005).

The decline of ideological differences and the observation that ideologies no longer generated fundamental conflicts and violent controversy have to do with the fact that we are experimenting a growing agreement in a number of policy areas where sharp conflicts formerly prevailed. Conservatism, liberalism, socialism are no longer systems of ideas presenting a theory of development and prescriptions. In European societies ideological orientations giving way to pragmatic ones.

Indeed, social modernization does transform the content of ideological polarization and the degree of this division. Nevertheless, the ideological structures are important in modelling processes of coalition formation, political representation, and electoral competition. In summary, it is premature to argue that ideology is ending in any region of the globe because citizens still rely on political orientations such as Left or Right for their political action.

**3. Political Ideologies and Social Imaginaries**

In what concerns to the End of Political Ideologies debate, we need to go deeper. In fact, ideologies are a resource for ordering, defining, and evaluating political reality and for constituting identities. Ideas that place the individual in a social context and generate a collective feeling of inclusion. They provide a perspective for understanding the world, support certain beliefs or political values that guide human behaviour, and set goals to achieve. They are culture concretions, manifestations of what ought to be social life, and, as so, as they provide different standards of understanding institutional life, they reflect culture social patterns, i.e., they furnish, among other elements, a social imaginary.

But what is a social imaginary?

In 1975, Cornelius Castoriadis used the term in his book *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, sustaining that the social imaginary has not been composed by conceptions about what a society is but by what gives sense to the symbols, the goods, the institutions, i.e., what configures the *ethos* of a group. In these terms, the best way to define a society is a set of shared and unifying conceptions that provide a significant content and are framed in symbolic structures.

Benedict Anderson emphasizes the constructive aspect of the imaginative creations but goes beyond the specificity of meaning and signification underling several social imaginaries as a differentiator source between societies. To Anderson, the same social imaginary does not only have a differentiator and identity aspect of a particular society. To Anderson, the social imaginary is not the only identity differentiator of a particular society; it is more than that – it is transversal to different groups or societies, and it is formed and developed in history in its civilizational terms. An example of this conception is the social imaginary underlying to the concept of nation. The modern concept of nation has been instituted in many societies, since the end of the 18th century, because people were called to participate and to take part in similar kinds of social practices, forming, due to public participation, imagined communities that helped to fixate new identities or new nations. If we understand nation as «an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign» (Anderson, 1991: p. 15), we can understand that the social imaginary is not specific of a group or a society, mas but it is shared by different societies.

Taylor has acknowledged the influence of Benedict Anderson in his formulation of the concept of the social imaginary. He states: «What Is a ‘‘Social Imaginary’’? (…) By social imaginary, I mean something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking, rather, of the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations» (Taylor, 2004, p. 23).

Charles Taylor emphasizes that a modern social imaginary is not the way society imagines, but the way we imagine society. This is a very significant turn in the mainstream theory on social imaginaries. It is no longer a social or sociological theory, an external observation that allows a characterization and an empirical definition of what a society may be, as in Castoriadis; nor if the same social imaginary is extensible or common to different groups or societies as the underlined imaginary of the notion that Andersen uses as an example.

Departing from Andersen´s thesis, although with an emphasis on phenomenological analysis, Taylor reaffirms the importance of cultural models that enlighten a vision of the world and that are sources of identity to those who share them, but he stresses that the social imaginaries are now modern, i.e., fit not only in groups or nations, but also, in its own way, in the individual.

It is in this sense that the notion of national community, the one of a nation, demands a comprehension of the specificity of a cultural particularity and not merely an assertion of political ideologies that may characterize them. In fact, particular political ideologies, as liberalism, conservatism or socialism are no longer the main identity references for a nation; on the other hand, a collective community compromised with certain values and ideals that articulate the same social imaginary in factual political programs seems the most adequate criterion to define, nowadays, what a political ideology may be.

This is, in Western neo-liberal societies, I suppose, a much deeper sign, a sign that shows or anticipates the end of classical cleavages between political ideologies such as liberalism and socialism. People no long care whether left or right wings control political institutions. But that, I think, is only the superficial outlook of a misguided or distorted interpretation. There is a spread sense that the State is too big to solve small problems and too small to solve big problems and the majority of problems that people face in their everyday lives are too small to deserve attention and the intervention of a centralized government. As such, we are starting to witness a growing sentiment of frustration, especially because participation in political life, to be involved in determining the shape of our societies, is an important aspect of affirming our own personal identity.

**4. A New Social Imaginary**

What it is determinant to understand what a nation or a society may be are not the political ideologies, those can be easily identified, but what is fundamentally are the cultural models which are shared in a similar way and the common implicit schemes of the world interpretation.

A collective identity is composed by different and subjective interpretations of what unites its members, and, because of it, it is a shared mental realm, more symbolic than normative, more imaginary than statutory. It provides the context through which a specific political organization may exist and the comprehension and justification of its institutions (Steger, 2009).

As we experience this changing in the political ideology to the social imaginary, the feeling of interdependency and the need of a relation and the encounter between cultures and civilizations, which is inherent to that change and to the evolution of the social imaginary, is, at the same time, the reason of his weakening and fragmentation. The thesis is: in the same way the globalized world has been affirming a global imaginary, the social imaginary of a Nation is degrading, what, necessarily, results in a diffuse understanding an in a disfigured affirmation of the personal and collective identity. The national feeling, of belonging to a Nation, is progressively defied by a global feeling, the one in we belong to the world.

Of course this global imaginary is only possible because it has the means to constitute and to affirm itself, and that affirmation goes through out the action of the individuals that, for reasons like distorted representativity, partisanship, elitism, populism and negative nationalisms, but in particular by economic globalization and by the affirmation of a public opinion through media networks that are formed worldwide (Urbinati, 2014), forge new identities or identify other sources of identity that also give meaning to their being and their being in the world, giving rise to new cosmopolitan ideologies. However, this global imaginary is incomplete and dysfunctional since it lacks the foundations and the social and political institutions to constitute itself as a global social imaginary.

In terms of the imaginary globalism attempted by economic and political elites, it points out its positive aspects such as the general increase in the standard of living, the reduction of poverty on a global scale and technological progress. However, we can also identify its dangers: accentuated social inequalities and marginalization of those who are left behind, the proliferation of conflicting forms of self-interest satisfaction, the accentuation of individualism and the destruction of the bonds of solidarity between individuals and peoples, environmental destruction and, above all, the weakening of democratic forms of participation in the construction of the world in which we live and want to live in.

Although incomplete and dysfunctional, this global or planetary imaginary is a cosmopolitan imaginary that is created around a social and political sense, individually formed, and affirmed in opposition to the social and political sense of a collectively shared nationality. It emerges through a notion of cultural unity promoted by globalization and depoliticization of principles of social and political organization that are now considered natural and universal. Without the need for institutional support, allied with an ideal of authenticity based on an individualized, atomized, and radicalized notion of autonomy and self-realization, the consequence is the rise of an ordinary life in which the affirmation of the equal dignity of choices leads to moral relativism.

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