



Why does that matter? Because we can make the world a better place...¹

Takeaways points from the panel “Ideology in the 21st century”

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Even for the political parties, it is hard not to become cynical nowadays. For about three decades it has been repeated that the contemporary societies are formed by post-modernist trends. Consequently, that people are less and less attached to one or another ideology. When the crisis hit in 2008, having shaken the exiting order of things at its core, political annalists dropped postmodernism and started speaking about post truth. This has been their way to justify citizens' rejectionist attitudes towards traditional politics, as also explanation as why voters would be so susceptible to the appeals of the extreme, anti-systemic movements. In that context, it is fair to ask why one would still believe that ideological struggle would matter and hence after, if it was indeed plausible to try changing the trend(s).

But the tougher it gets, the harder the politicians should work to preserve the genuine idea that values, mission and commitment to improving the world matter. In fact, there are at least three reasons to argue that despite it all – or even perhaps because of that all - retrieving the sense of ideologies is the key to restoring in power of the respective traditional parties².

First of all, there is an ethical dimension. It answers the question what an ideology is, or rather what it should be in the contemporary reality. An ideology should define the party: whom with and for whom it is standing for. It should entail the explanation of what its' values are, and hereafter what sort of a mission it wants to accomplish. To give an example, since 1970s, the progressives have been describing their ideology to be framed by the values of equality and solidarity. These define the subsequent principles for actions, which is a struggle for social justice and democracy, as also for emancipation and life in dignity for all. Altogether they are the coordinates of the vision of a better and fairer society the progressives wish to strive for, determining their take on: indispensable rights and decent standards. They are the guidelines in defining relations between labour and capital, which then comes down to economic question regarding production, consumption, contribution and distribution models. They determine the social contract, which is there to ensure opportunities and safety (nets) for each and everyone. In that sense, ideology stands for what is right and just. It offers sense and coherence to all actions, it makes parties defined by ideology predictable and hence after trustworthy. In other words, parties that are considered as ideological and not cynical, are the ones people are ready to support. Even if they know that these organisations will never be able to change the world at once, they can allow themselves to believe that at least they will be committed to their values and hence after they will try.

Secondly, there is a political dimension. It answers the question why an ideology should matter. As argued already, it should be bringing coherence as the framework defining political choices. In that sense, even if the values themselves may seem abstract, their actual explanation lies in the way they are actually used by the respective parties. In that sense, ideologies build on tradition and they help ensuring legitimacy to the past doings. That is equally relevant to their role in defining mission, and hence after the level of ambition and the evaluation, delivery criteria. For the progressives the most telling example how this can be done is their commitment to welfare state, which they have been protagonist of and which they want to make work to cater the needs of the changing society. To that extend, the same ideological backbone will serve as a reference point on how to explain modernity and approach new kind of choices that i.e. evolution of the labour market, digitalization of the

economies and demographic challenges are to place ahead of them. Here it is worth remarking that voters would be capable to understand and forgive wrong choices, if they could trust that parties that had made them indeed were driven by ideology, and not by determinism (TINA), electoral opportunism or short-termism instead.

Thirdly, there is a strategic dimension. It comes down to the question of how to make ideologies matter again. And here the key is in understanding ideology as a connecting point between politics and society. It is possible to present here a hypothesis that it was neither post modernism in the past, nor post-truth today that erode that relation. It was rather a disconnection, whereby citizens who have mobilized against: the neoliberal globalization in the 1990s, against the inegalitarian order that had led to the crash of 2008 and finally now against systems that do not work for them, have demanded a different quality of politics. They called for more justice, more equality and more democracy respectively – no finding these embodied in the actions of the traditional parties. While the last mobilization is still there, seeing the end of permissive consensus and so many protests votes, it may not be too late to use its context and publically renew the commitment to those principles again. They, and not the simplified office seeking approach, should be the drives for the parties to stand elections, as also the guidelines when they form governmental programmes and coalitions.

The challenge remains therefore not to let cynicism and hence after pragmatism to take over, but rather to retrieve the commitment that drove politicians to politics once upon a time. And here there is one more important thing to keep in mind. It is not to allow that the traditional ideologies are put in the one basket as “all pro-democracy, just different in nuances”. This is what brought people’s disappointment that “all parties are the same” to begin with. Precisely because of their ideologies they aren’t. Therefore the way to make ideologies matter again – in ethical, political and strategic sense - that would be the condition sine qua non of rebirth of these parties, is them work in all three dimensions respectively: ethical, political and strategic.

¹ *The tittle of this viewpoint uses phrase by Zygmunt Baumann, paying the tribute to his work and commemorating him, as he passed away on the day the NDI event in Brussels started. Baumann said (in the context when people asked him what is the point of trying to change trends in the era of postmodernism): Why do I write all these books... Because it matters. Because we can make the world a better place.*

² *The term ‘traditional parties’ is here used in reference to the parties belonging to historical movements – conservatives, progressives (social democrats), liberals, but also greens.*