

Contrary to popular belief, traditional ideologies are not dead and continue to map the politics of the global age

LSE blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2014/02/21/contrary-to-popular-belief-traditional-ideologies-are-not-dead-and-continue-to-map-the-politics-of-the-global-age/

21/02/2014

*A number of commentators and academics have argued that globalisation has undermined the relevance of traditional political ideologies. **Rafal Soborski** takes issue with this perspective, arguing that ideologies such as Marxism, liberalism and ecologism have managed to absorb globalisation within their conceptual structures. He also notes that 'post-ideological' perspectives may unintentionally benefit one particular ideology. By undermining the long-standing rivals of neoliberalism, they reinforce the argument that it is no longer valid to question neoliberal principles in the post-Cold War era.*



The dominant position in the debate concerning the ideological impact of globalisation is that the process has destabilised the established political belief systems – liberalism, socialism and so forth – to the extent that they are no longer able to map the political world or inspire political action.

This view has been put forward amid broader doubts about the relevance of ideology as such in the assumed context of postmodernity and the related shift away from 'grand narratives'. It has been advanced alongside arguments purporting that nationally defined politics is being eroded in favour of greater preoccupation with fragmented identities and largely de-territorialised concerns that are not given adequate articulation in the categories coined for a more homogenous age. Such assertions entail alternative ideological typologies with which to navigate the political landscape. Various new 'isms' have thus populated the debate – particularly an assortment of 'globalisms' – and the analysts who stick with the old terms have been charged with intellectual irrelevance.

In my recent book, *Ideology in a Global Age*, I take issue with this claim of ideological rupture and consequent fading of the traditional systems of political beliefs. The book draws on the assumption that the reality of such a shift may only be concluded by engaging with ideological discourse itself, prior to any speculation about the socio-political circumstances allegedly eroding the established ideologies in favour of new sets of political ideas – such as the decline (or continuity) of statism and nationalism, or the rise (or otherwise) of post-modernity or globalisation. Such an analysis puts in doubt the novelty of what some analysts posit as fresh ideological configurations. These appear, in fact, to be old wine in not-so-new bottles and so are more accurately considered as conceptual clusters within familiar systems of political beliefs.

I focus on a selection of ideologies, both pro- and anti-globalist, scattered all along the traditional left–right ideological spectrum. I examine how the priorities of major ideological currents relate to globalisation, either directly or via other themes in arguments only partly related to global issues. I show that the concern with globalisation has been voiced by the main ideologies in ways that fit in their recognisable conceptual contours, reinforce their objectives, and legitimise their means.



Credit: Lars Plougmann (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

Accordingly and not unexpectedly, universalist ideologies, such as liberalism or Marxism, have endorsed globalisation either in its present incarnation or, in the Marxist case, in principle, by postulating that while the world today is unjust and oppressive, the post-capitalist future will necessarily be global as well. From the point of view adopted by free-market liberals, the current form of globalisation fulfils the long-term liberal aspiration: the creation of worldwide market civilisation with all that this achievement allegedly implies, namely the promotion of prosperity, peace and democracy. Marxists, on the other hand, have approached the progressive expansion of the capitalist system as central to their vision of history moving dialectically towards an inevitable revolutionary transformation.

Opposed to universalism, a number of other ideological systems have rejected globalising tendencies more or less forcefully. Again, such positions have been articulated in terms contingent on broader, entrenched priorities. The enemies of globalisation have identified the process as synonymous with, or ensuing from, or aggravating, the ills that they have always contested. For example, from the standpoint of radical ecologism, globalisation is the culmination of Western modernity and of the problems that are inherent to it. The extension of modernity's pathologies – anthropocentrism, individualism, materialism and so forth – on a global scale leaves humankind oblivious to the imminent limits to growth. Ecological salvation requires an ecocentric ethics and this is not likely to come about without relocalisation of social life.

Other ideological currents have been more equivocal. Anarchists have been globalist in their affirmation of universal solidarity, but localist when stressing the need for decentralisation and community autonomy. Democratic socialists have likewise struggled to reconcile their globalist commitments with theories of agency that stress the crucial role for the state in the process of democratic transition beyond capitalism.

Social democracy, finally, has developed several responses to globalisation. While some social democrats make the case for raising social democratic principles up from national to global levels, the prevalent social democratic reaction has been to rebut globalisation as incompatible with long-standing social democratic objectives revolving around the notion of the welfare state as mitigating the instabilities produced by the market. From this perspective, globalisation is a powerful myth whose paralysing impact explains the unwarranted crisis of the welfare state. Social democratic discourse has consequently centred on the task of demythologising this pernicious idea.

The continued relevance of traditional ideologies in the global age

The above extremely cursory summary glosses over many logical tensions that are abundant in the ideological arguments and narratives discussed in my book. My argument there does not suggest that ideological interpretations of globalisation are always predictable or straightforward. The point is rather that the potential incongruities between pre-existing ideational patterns and the new concept of globalisation are solved, masked or evaded in ways that exhibit recognisable ideological identities. Ideologies have been reconfigured to take account of the concept of globalisation, but the changes have been internal to these established belief systems. All of them have managed to absorb globalisation within their conceptual structures rather than having themselves been absorbed by it.

My emphasis on ideological continuity does not mean either that I believe the range of ideological currents will necessarily remain limited to the major long-established traditions. Newfangled ideological configurations may come into view in response to changing political circumstances and it is important to discern new ideological segments where they materialise and to be prepared in light of their emergence to reconsider the topography of the ideological landscape. But what should be challenged are proposals of sweeping ideological realignments motivated merely by the rise of a new buzzword, even one as intoxicating as globalisation.

There are several reasons to oppose such claims. If ideologies are maps of the political world, then they may only serve their purpose when they make sense: that is to say, when they are recognisable and meaningful entities and endowed with sufficient conceptual capacity to provide answers to the questions that societies may pose. Ideological categories detached from past political controversies risk ending up as a flash in the pan and usually pass away when a new instance of hip political jargon or a new academic fad takes their place. Such ephemeral -

isms are likely to infringe upon our ability to navigate the political world.

On the other hand, an adequate recognition of the connections between contemporary and past political arguments is useful both theoretically and practically. Theoretical understanding of ideology-laden readings of globalisation is advanced when these interpretations are considered historically as integral to time-honoured political belief systems and subject to long-standing competition between them. Practically, awareness of the lineage of, for instance, the dominant neoliberal narrative of globalisation, provides discerning insights into its possible implications and the policies that it may encourage, for example with regard to the alleged necessity – ‘in these new times’ – of breaking up established institutional frameworks, such as the welfare-state. Identifying the ideological underpinnings of such proposals may help not just in understanding but also in confronting them, if that is what one wants to do.

The debate on globalisation and ideology does have a strong normative orientation in that it often postulates wide-ranging counter-hegemonic alliances to challenge the political status quo. But proponents of ideological rupture may have been counterproductive in this respect. By substituting terms with little resonance in real life political deliberations for recognisable, and thus potentially effective, discourses of belonging, agency and empowerment they may have helped legitimise the hegemonic contention that ‘there is no alternative’. Neoliberals are keen to declare rival ideological projects to be irrelevant, belonging to the age of Cold War divisions and grand socio-political designs. It is ironic that this view has received inadvertent reinforcement from many activists and scholars who otherwise declare themselves opposed to the neoliberal agenda.

For a longer discussion of this topic, see the author’s recent book, [Ideology in a Global Age: Continuity and Change](#) (Palgrave MacMillan, 2013)

Please read our comments policy before commenting.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

Shortened URL for this post: <http://bit.ly/1dTHGAO>

About the author

Rafal Soborski – *Richmond University*

[Rafal Soborski](#) is Associate Professor of International Politics at Richmond University. He has taught extensively in areas of global studies and ideology, and has published articles on globalisation, ideology and green political thought. He is on Twitter: [@rafalsoborski](#)



-