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The Rise of the Global Imaginary and the Persistence of Ideology

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Political ideologies emerged at a crucial historical juncture—the great American and French revolutions of the eighteenth century—as authoritative systems of meaning consciously competing with religious doctrines. Taking a more this-worldly perspective on the origin and purpose of human communities, ideologies

nonetheless resemble religion in their attempts to link the various ethical, cultural, and political dimensions of society into fairly a comprehensive shared mental models. Imitating religions' penchant to trade in truth and certainty, political belief systems rely heavily on stories that persuade, praise, condemn, cajole, convince, and separate the 'good' from the 'bad'. Like narratives of the sacred, ideologies both generate and thrive on human emotions. Certain political belief systems have inspired mass murder, torture, and rape much in the same way as some religious doctrines have fueled the flames of human suffering throughout the centuries. In fact, nearly all of the major political crimes committed in the last two centuries have been justified on the basis of some 'ism'. But although ideologies serve such deceptive and manipulative purposes, they also represent ideas and claims that express the noble aspirations of particular sections of society at a given time in history.

The defeat of Nazi Germany in 1945 and the collapse of the Soviet Empire in 1991 enticed scores of Western commentators to relegate 'ideology' to the dustbin of history. Proclaiming a radically new era in human history, they argued that ideology had ended with the final triumph of liberal capitalism. But this dream of a universal set of political ideas ruling the world came crashing down with the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. Since then, Western political leaders as different as George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Nikolas Sarkozy have argued that the contest with jihadist Islamism represents much more than the military conflict: as they put it, it is the 'decisive ideological struggle of our time.' In short, far from being moribund, competing political belief systems are live and well in the twenty-first century. But which ideologies? Liberalism? Conservatism? Socialism?

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This is where the confusion starts. Although we know that ideology has not ended, we still grope for words to name what's actually new. So what have we come up with so far? Neoliberalism. Neoconservatism. NeoMarxism. Neofascism. Postmodernism. Postindustrialism. Postcolonialism. And the list goes on. But does this proliferation of prefixes really help us to understand the novelty of our shifting ideological landscape? Are today's isms merely updated versions of our familiar ideologies? Or

have we moved into genuinely new territory?

Let me suggest that there is, indeed, something genuinely new about today's isms. These shared mental maps that help us navigate our political universe no longer correspond neatly to our familiar mental and geographical spaces built over two centuries on the foundation of sovereign and self-contained nation-state. Instead, ideologies have begun to translate into political programs and agendas of what I call the 'global imaginary'. What I mean is a shared sense of a thickening world community, bound together by processes of globalization that are daily shrinking our planet. The rising global imaginary finds its articulation not only in the ideological claims of political leaders and business elites who reside in privileged spaces around the world. It also fuels the hopes, disappointments, and demands of migrants who traverse national boundaries in search of their piece of the global promise. In fact, the global imaginary is nobody's exclusive property. It inhabits class, race, and gender, but belongs to neither. It is an impressive testimony to the messy superimposition of the global village on the conventional nation-state.

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Consider, for example, today's asymmetric wars that pit alliances of nation-states and non-state actors against amorphous transnational terrorist networks that nonetheless operate in specific localities-usually in 'global cities' like New York, London, Madrid, or Jakarta. New global pandemics expose the limits of our national public health systems. Nationally framed environmental policies cannot respond adequately to accelerating global climate change. Conventional education and immigration schemes based on national goals and priorities are incapable of preparing shifting populations for the pressing tasks of global citizenship. Cultivating global fan clubs of millions of members, European football teams like Manchester United have long escaped the confines of nation-based geography. And the list goes on.

Indeed, well-intentioned attempts to 'update' modern political belief systems by adorning them with prefixes resemble futile efforts to make sense of digital word processing by drawing on the mechanics of moveable print. Since liberalism,

conservatism, and socialism have been transformed beyond recognition by the forces of globalization, it is imperative that we get to know the new political belief systems that fuel the great ideological struggle of the twenty-first century. This is not merely an academic exercise but a moral imperative for people interested in finding answers to the pressing global problems of our time. For it is these new articulations of the global imaginary that have begun to offer us possible roadmaps to solving our energy crisis without adding to the pollution of our great green planet; to maintain our economic prosperity while reducing global disparities in wealth and wellbeing; and to combat new transnational forms of political violence without unleashing the nightmare of nuclear confrontation or perpetuating an ill-conceived 'global war on terror'.

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social imaginary

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