

BOOK REVIEW

Polar Stars. Why the Political Ideologies of Modernity Still Matter

by Mauro Barisione. Milano: Milano University Press. 2021, 302p. €22 (paperback).

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Ideology is one of the most discussed topics in political science. It has been the subject of some of the longest-lasting and most prolific agendas in the discipline, spanning over its hybridizations with sociology, psychology and economics. It has been used as a lens through which to study numerous political phenomena, from legislative to electoral behavior. Furthermore, it has been blessed by a fortunate fate for ideas: it has been declared dead too soon. Starting from prominent scholars dazzled by historical contingencies, passing by political actors trying to find a place for themselves out of traditional divisions, the rumor about the end of ideology has actually ensured its endurance, by breeding a fertile research field in turn. It is to this body of literature that the book by Mauro Barisione wishes to contribute.

However, the goal of *Polar Stars* is more ambitious than just weighing in on the ‘end of ideology’ debate. The first contribution of this work is to provide a theoretical framework to understand political ideologies *tout court*, or more specifically, to connect the positions taken by political actors (being implemented policies or expressed preferences) with a concise set of *guiding principles*. These are the three ‘polar stars’ after which the book is titled: the principle of *order* (guiding the ideological ‘matrix’, or template, of *conservatism*), the principle of *freedom* (guiding the matrix of *liberalism*), and the principle of *equality* (guiding the matrix of *progressivism/socialism*). The way these principles arose in Western societies since the advent of modernity, their rationalization into the three ideological matrices, their ebbs and flows over the last four centuries, and their connection to ‘political’ (related to the organization of the society) and ‘metapolitical’ (related to the relationship between the state and society) goals, is the topic of three thematic chapters of the book. Moreover, a further chapter investigates the different *hybridizations* between the three ideological matrices, offering an interesting interpretation of extremism as the tendency to pursue a *pure* ideological type, that is, to follow one polar star to the detriment of the others. This discussion nicely integrates the tension between ‘moderate’ and ‘radical’, two terms that are often associated with ideological labels in everyday speech, within the ‘polar stars’ framework. These chapters, which overall make about half of the book, draw on extensive literature in history and political philosophy.

The second contribution of this book is to demonstrate, argumentatively and empirically by drawing on parties’ own political manifestos, how the three ideological matrices and their hybrids (and by extension, the polar stars guiding them) still characterize the political landscape in Western democracies today. This is where the book most closely contributes to the ‘end of ideology’ debate. Indeed, a thread running through the chapters is that the logic of modernity, which rationalized the critical conflicts of interest within societies giving rise to the three ideological matrices, is still alive and informing current political divisions. In this respect, a dedicated chapter

explores important topics in today's political debate by putting them in relation to the ideological matrices and their polar stars. The most important of these topics is surely the ubiquitousness of liberalism, its hybridization with the conservative matrix (in the Reagan–Thatcher era) and with the progressive matrix (both in the social-economic domain, with the 'third way' left of the 1990s, and in the cultural domain, with the current wave of 'identity politics'). It is this 'liberal colonization' of the other ideological matrices that inspired Francis Fukuyama's famous thesis of the 'end of history'. According to Barisione, this process was due to a 'centrifugal thrust' toward individualism, a societal reaction to the 'centripetal' tendencies of the post-war consensus (which, in turn, inspired the first claim of the end of ideology, made by Daniel Bell in 1960).

At this point a specification is necessary. The level of explanation in Barisione's book mainly draws on the sociology of history. This has two implications. First, in the vein of sociological structuralism and historicism, the explanations proposed here for the evolution of party ideologies pay little attention to the *agency* of political actors. This is explicitly recognized in some parts, and it surely helps the reader understand the processes described by framing them into a coherent narrative. The political and ideological change is described by the means of 'movements', which can be 'centrifugal' (in the direction of one specific polar star) or 'centripetal' (toward a synthesis of all three polar stars). This level of analysis, and this is the second implication, is genuinely descriptive. Even though the causal direction is assumed to go from society to the reign of ideas, political change is often presented as a logical consequence of a specific contingency, that is, the encounter between a specific context, a set of societal demands, and a given configuration of the political supply. A good example is the discussion of the success of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders in the US, who according to Barisione were not fully 'responsible for their relative successes' but 'they limited themselves to interpreting and actively representing broad popular demands and public expectations, which were, in turn, a reflection of the defining properties of a historical context' (241). So while party agency is not denied, the micro-moves of political actors are assumed away in the broader historical perspective taken in the book, which focuses on the bigger picture.

The third contribution of *Polar Stars* is empirical. In the final chapter, Barisione conducts a number of statistical analyses using data from the European Social Survey, as well as original survey data collected in five countries in 2020. Following the scope of the book, these analyses are genuinely descriptive and correlational: Barisione first classifies respondents as belonging to one of the three ideological matrices or their hybrids, and puts them in relation to the party they voted for using multiple correspondence analysis. The finding, consistent across data collections, is that ideological voters tend indeed to prefer the party types that best represent their own ideological matrix. The analyses in this chapter provide an interesting empirical corroboration of what is discussed elsewhere in the book. The use of a scaling technique such as correspondence analysis reflects the basic assumption of the multidimensionality of ideology, and the resulting figures confirm such a makeup. So while on the one hand, this chapter feels very different from the rest of the book, almost out of place if we consider the historical perspective taken in the other chapters, on the other hand, it provides additional material to reflect upon.

In sum, *Polar Stars* is one of the most comprehensive studies about the history of political ideologies in Western democracies published in recent times. As such, it is a useful read for both an academic and a general audience interested in making sense of a complex and often confusing topic. To be sure, the broad perspective taken here overlooks other, more reductionist views. These include the psychological perspectives that have enriched our understanding of citizens' politically-relevant traits over the last two decades (traits that Barisione, in my opinion unfairly, discards as mere products of social dispositions), or the literature on party strategic position-taking, and its impact on ideological discourse. However, given the goal to provide a big picture, this book succeeds without any doubt.