

POLITICAL IDEOLOGY AS AN EVOLUTIONARY SYSTEM (TO THE THEORY OF COGNITIVE- IDEOLOGICAL MATRICES)

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the article is to concretize the concept of political ideology in the aspect of its matrix structure and in the context of the cognitive-evolutionary approach. Based on Michael Frieden's morphological approach to the analysis of ideological consciousness, the concept of cognitive-ideological matrices is introduced, which allows us to describe the process of transition from proto-ideological to ideological concepts proper, especially at the level of individual consciousness. The identification of the ideological concept as the main “gene” of conceptual variability and inheritance made it possible to describe the main parameters of the evolution of political ideologies and associate it with changes taking place at the individual consciousness level. The described concept was tested in a series of sociological studies of youth consciousness conducted in 2015-2016 and 2018-2020. As a result of the study, it was possible to first identify the “zero level” of ideology, at which the minds of young respondents are potentially open to the influence of diverse and often mutually exclusive ideological orientations, and second, to pinpoint the changes that have occurred in the cognitive ideological matrices of Rostov-on-Don students over the past five years. This study was conducted by scientists from the southern Federal University.

***Keywords:** Political Ideology, Cognitive Matrix, Ideologeme, Concept, Meme*

INTRODUCTION

One of the main problems in the study of political ideologies is the polysemy of key ideological concepts, as well as the excessive variability of their reflection in public the consciousness. W.B. Gally even put forward in this connection a rather radical concept of “the essential contestedness of the concepts of political language” [1]. This problem has repeatedly become the object of study. Suffice it to mention the concept of F. Jameson's ideologeme, as well as the concept of “floating signifiers” proposed by J. Lacan, and then developed by E. Laclau, C. Mouffe, S. Žižek and others [2]; [3]; [4] to describe the relationship between heterogeneous mass consciousness and logically ordered ideological systems. Russian studies of the influence of ideologies on youth consciousness also record its inconsistency, heterogeneity, and even fragmentation [5]. At the same time, all

researchers characterize ideology as an objective social phenomenon with such properties as structural integrity and consistency.

And here, one of the most interesting problems is the explanation of the transition from heterogeneous consciousness to a systematized ideology and back. If we study ideology from the point of view of mass psychology, then we are faced with a problem that was defined in 1964 by a group of American sociologists led by Philip Converse [6]: systematic ideologization is not characteristic of mass consciousness; mass “belief systems” combine fragments of various ideologies, which often contradict each other. Perhaps for this reason, modern social and political psychologists prefer to talk only about the “premises” and “foundations” of ideology in mass psychology [7] and not about a holistic system of attitudes and views represented in ideological systems.

Another sphere of social knowledge - research in the field of ideologies (study of ideologies) - traditionally follows the opposite path from the point of view of ideology as an objective phenomenon that affects mass consciousness. Certain progress has been made in recent years in this area of research. Particularly, there was a transition from the idea of ideology as a kind of frozen conceptual system to a much more dynamic idea of the flexible nature of ideological systems, which allows us to consider the shifts in mass consciousness and their reflection in ideologies. Thus, on the basis of the historical data about the emergence of the “new” liberalism, one of the leading experts in this field, the British political philosopher Michael Freedon showed [8] how the shifts that occurred in the mass consciousness reflected on the morphological structure of liberal ideology. The morphological concept of ideology proposed by Freedon partially solved the problems discussed here. However, in recent years, it was Freedon himself who proclaimed a crisis in the field of the study of ideologies [9] linking it with the emergence of “ideolonoids” - ideological “ghosts” that broke all ties with reality and exist solely for their own sake. Freedon believes that one of the key reasons for the emergence of “ideolonoids” is the destruction of the balance (that is inherent in classical ideological systems) between intellectual content, imagination, and emotions in favour of the latter. Large ideological narratives become too stiff and heavy in a rapidly changing reality, requiring an immediate response to the emerging problems that are heatedly discussed in a boiling media space and immediately discarded in favour of new ones [9]. Therefore, we have yet again returned to the original problem of the relationship between the mosaic mass consciousness and systematized ideologies.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

To solve this problem, the author's concept of cognitive-ideological matrices was developed [10], which presupposes co-evolution of logically ordered ideological systems and heterogeneous group consciousness, as well as their mutual influence on each other. The ideas of the cognitive social psychologist and religious scholar Pascal Boyer [11], who showed the evolutionary relationship

between religious ideas and culture, on the one hand, and cognitive limitations, as well as group thinking, served as one of the models for the development of this concept. On the other hand. As a unit of such evolution, P. Boyer used the concept of a “meme” (analogous to the “gene”) proposed by R. Dawkins as a stable element of human culture transmitted through the channels of linguistic information; if biological genes are localized in chromosomes, then “memes” are stored in human memory and transmitted from generation to generation using verbal means [12]. This concept was developed by P. Boyer in his new book “Religion Explained” [13], since it is this concept that allows to resolve a number of traditional difficulties of cultural studies and philosophy of culture. Thus, “meme models”, according to P. Boyer, allow us to question the idea of culture as a kind of abstraction and thereby resolve the contradiction between individual and cultural experience: “What we mean when we say that something is “cultural” is that it is roughly similar to what we find in other members of the particular group we are considering, and unlike what we would find in members of a contrast group.” [13]. We can compare the types of human cultures with biological species, and consider memes as units of cultural information as self-copying replicators.

However, exactly the same move is permissible in relation to another social phenomenon - political ideology. As noted above, two key difficulties in the study of ideologies are the plasticity of their conceptual apparatus, on the one hand, and the absence of an unambiguous connection between the logically ordered level of ideology and its representations in the heterogeneous mass consciousness, on the other hand. If we proceed from the functional interpretation of ideology, then we can see that both of these problems are interconnected: among the key functions of ideology are usually called evaluative, explanatory and orientational, which forces ideology to speak in a language understandable to the masses and in understandable terms to represent the variability of the current socio-political problematics, but at the same time the constant desire to mimic scientific knowledge requires from ideology constant efforts to logically (re)order its own conceptual structure. As shown above, it was the sharp acceleration of social time and the sluggishness of ideological systems that led M. Frieden to the conclusion about the crisis of traditional ideologies in the modern world [9]. But the idea of a crisis can arise only if we oppose the level of ideology to the level of mass consciousness. The approach proposed by P. Boyer for the study of religions and their conceptualization in terms of the cognitive-evolutionary approach allows solving this problem.

Implementing this approach, the presented concept of cognitive-ideological matrices involves the allocation of two levels in the matrix - the level of ideologemes and the level of concepts. This distinction demonstrates how conceptual ideological systems set cognitive structures for crystallization in the individual consciousness of ideological concepts, and at the same time explain the empirically observed conceptual contradictions in this consciousness. The ideologeme differs from the concept in that it retains its “vague” character [14], when symbolically expresses conceptual and value content. In other words, an

ideologeme is a concept expressed by linguistic means. Accordingly, in the co-evolutionary process, not only the concepts most adapted to specific situations are selected, but also the symbolic means with which they are expressed. The unity of both levels is expressed in the cognitive-ideological matrix.

However, the study of these levels by means of traditional quantitative sociological research is not always possible. The conceptual level of the cognitive-ideological matrix is quite amenable to such research, but the symbolic level of ideologemes requires some other ways of studying. Given the extremely vague nature of ideologemes as proto-units of cognitive-ideological matrices, their study using a questionnaire survey is extremely difficult and is associated with the risk of projection onto the investigated group consciousness of the values and attitudes of the researcher himself. In addition, the “vague” nature of ideologemes means that the individual himself is not always able to clearly express the essence of the ideologeme when answering the questionnaire. But group interviews and focus groups do a good job with this task, which make it possible to record unconscious proto-ideological material with the aim of further developing a survey questionnaire on this basis.

Taking into account the theoretical and methodological attitudes described above, in the course of the study, the questionnaire was preceded by a series of free group interviews, and the quantitative results of the survey were corrected and specified on the quality material of the focus groups that completed the study. The first stage of the study was conducted in Rostov-on-Don universities in the period from late April to early June 2015. A total of 718 people was questioned (350 young men and 368 young women; so, the standard deviation in the selection was $\pm 3.7\%$). The questionnaire contained 41 questions, including 8 questions about the respondent's identity.

The second survey was conducted in Rostov-on-Don universities in the period from the end of September to the end of November 2019. The questionnaire contained 43 questions, including 6 questions about the respondent's identity. A total of 816 respondents were questioned, 435 of which were young men and 381 - women. The standard deviation was $\pm 3.4\%$.

RESULTS

The results obtained in the course of the research recorded a significant shift in youth consciousness. If in 2015 there was an excessive fascination of student youth with foreign policy problems (the joining of Crimea to Russia, the war in Ukraine, etc.), then in 2019 this agenda gave way to a domestic one. First of all, we are talking about the concern of students with such social and economic problems as quality of life, ecology, economic crisis and stagnation of the labour market. At the same time, it is important to note that the majority of respondents see the reasons for the economic crisis in the ineffectiveness of government and the low quality of administration (28.7 %), including a high level of corruption

and crime (38.4 %). Thus, it is quite likely that the processes of reflection in the youth consciousness of the political agenda will intensify, which may lead to an increase in protest activity.

This shift found its expression in a change in the ideological self-representations of student youth, in which in 2019 the tendencies toward a shift towards the left-liberal center of the ideological spectrum are most pronounced (Fig. 1). Usually, such dramatic shifts are explained by changes in the socio-economic situation of the respondents. However, a comparison of the survey data for 2015 and 2019 showed that it was their financial situation that practically did not change over the past 5 years: the number of respondents who consider their financial situation to be poor slightly decreased, and at the same time, the number of those who consider their situation to be very poor slightly increased. However, these changes barely exceed the statistical error of $\pm 3.4\%$. Therefore, material factors cannot be considered the cause of the noted ideological shift.

The main thing that has changed, compared to 2015, is the gradual evaporation of the nationwide “post-Crimean” enthusiasm with a parallel increase in the feeling of crisis in all areas of public life. As shown by the data obtained in 2019, this feeling is also strengthening in the student's consciousness - 34.2 % of respondents assess the economic state of Russia as “pre-crisis”, and 35.4% - as “crisis”. A very small proportion of those who found it difficult to answer this question is symptomatic (only 14.6 %). Students are practically unanimous in their answer to the question whether there is an economic crisis in Russia now: 46.7 % answered that such a crisis has been observed, and for a long time; 28.7 % believe that our country is not so much in a crisis as in stagnation in the economy due to the ineffective policy of the authorities.

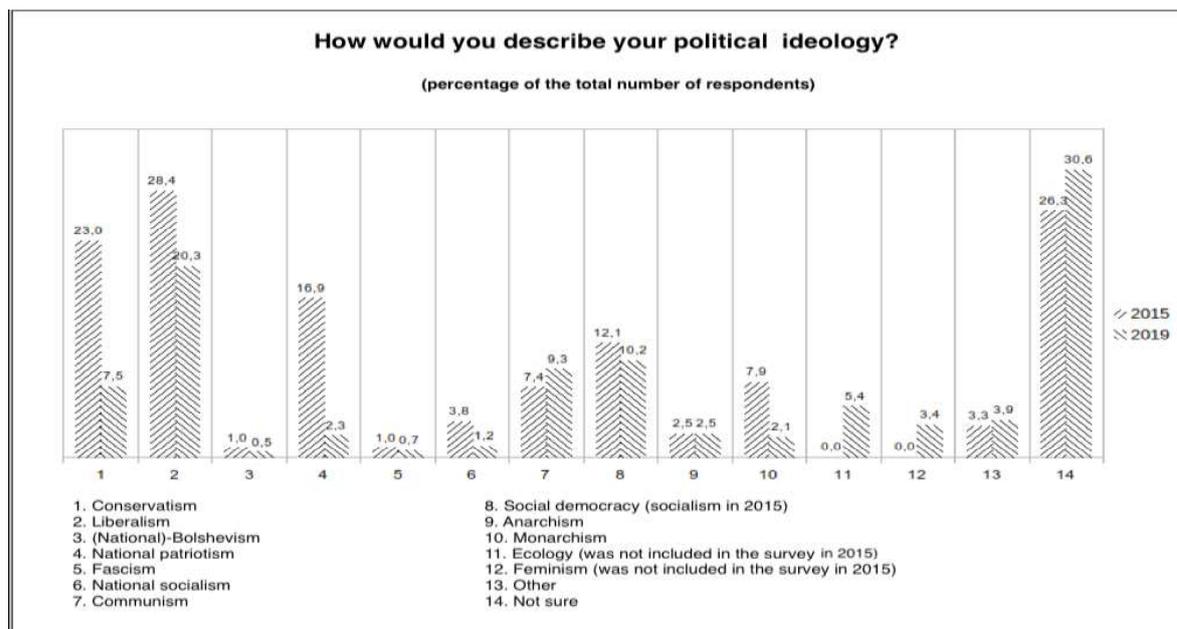


Fig. 1. The dynamics of ideological representations of student youth in the South of Russia

In accordance with the methodology for studying cognitive-ideological matrices, the first shifts should have occurred at the pre-reflective level of “vague” ideologemes, after which, if the trend persists, reflection should have occurred at the level of political concepts. It was this hypothesis that was confirmed during the research. The questions in the questionnaire related to the assessment of popular movie characters with whom the respondents associate themselves were focused on identifying the pre-reflective proto-ideological level. It is significant that the top three included Danila Bagrov from the film “Brother-2” (11.0 %), Margarita from the film “The Master and Margarita” (9.9 %), and hockey player Kharlamov from the film “Legend No. 17” (7.0 %). These heroes are not only active, but also easily disregarding earthly norms (Danila Bagrov) or universal (Margarita). The top popularity also includes the statements of movie characters: Danila Bagrov (“The power is in truth: whoever has the truth is stronger!”, 22.7%), hockey player Kharlamov (“It always seems to a person that he has much less power than he can really!”, 21.3 %) and T'Challa from the film “Black Panther” (“In times of crises, the wise build bridges while the foolish build barriers”, 18.5 %). The popularity of the first two statements, taking into account the desire of students to associate themselves with the authors of these statements, allows us to talk about quite reflective and symbolically significant referents of the student subculture. And they mean the attitude ripening in the student's mind to actively solve the problems of social justice, even if this solution requires going beyond what is permitted.

The semantic field of the third statement partially covers the meanings of the first two, but it is broader and reflects the critical attitude of students to the contemporary politics of Russia, which has led to the country's isolation in the international arena. This assumption is supported by other data obtained from the survey. So, to the question “How would you assess Russia's foreign policy?” exactly half (50.0 %) of the students chose the position “Our authorities are too carried away by foreign policy, but it would be necessary to focus on domestic policy.” Another 14.8 % of respondents believe that Russia's foreign policy is inconsistent and aggressive, and for this reason they feel a sense of shame. Only 17.8% (according to the three responding positions in total) of the students surveyed approve of the foreign policy of modern Russia to one degree or another.

Finally, if we go up to the conceptual level of the matrix, we can find the process of conceptualization of the above-mentioned trends in political slogans that has begun (see Table 1).

Table 1. Respondents attitude toward significant political slogans

Slogans	Strongly agree		Tend to agree		Strongly disagree		I don't care		Not sure	
	2015	2019	2015	2019	2015	2019	2015	2019	2015	2019
<i>Personal freedom and human rights are inviolable!</i>	74,0	75,5	15,5	16,3	1,5	0,7	1,9	1,6	7,1	5,9
<i>“Our hearts demand changes!..”*</i>	-	50,7	-	25,2	-	4,0	-	6,7	-	13,4
<i>All the troubles in Russia are caused by Judeo-Masonic conspiracy</i>	8,1	15,4	10,6	15,6	40,9	28,3	9,9	13,1	30,5	27,6
<i>Stop feeding other nations!</i>	10,9	38,5	23,3	23,0	30,2	13,8	15,0	7,7	20,6	16,9
<i>Free the Internet!*</i>	-	58,1	-	21,2	-	3,3	-	6,1	-	11,3
<i>Let's save nature for our children!*</i>	-	76,2	-	11,8	-	1,0	-	3,4	-	7,6
<i>Russia is only for Russians!</i>	8,2	11,4	25,6	11,6	45,1	50,1	10,2	12,5	10,9	14,3
<i>Down with the oligarchs! (“Eat pineapples and chew fois gras, your last day is coming, accursed bourgeois!” in 2019 survey)</i>	20,5	25,6	37,6	17,8	9,1	17,6	18,0	12,0	14,9	27,0
<i>For the Slavic brotherhood! (“Slavs of the world, unite!” in 2019 survey)</i>	35,4	22,2	24,2	19,9	6,7	20,0	12,1	15,2	21,6	22,8

**these slogans were not included in 2015 survey.*

If in 2015 student consciousness seemed to be heterogeneous and torn because it combined contradictory attitudes and values, in 2019 we observe solidification of left-liberal values in the cognitive ideological matrix. This can be seen in the decrease in the relevance of the far-right and far-left attitudes that contradict liberalism, with a shift of the entire structure to the center and somewhat to the left. However, at the same time, the well-known form of “welfare chauvinism” had retained its significance. In particular, this form of patriotism is manifested in a sharp increase in support of the slogan “Stop feeding other nations!” - from 34.2% in 2015 to 61.5% in 2019 (in summation of strongly agree and tend to agree responses). Furthermore, there’s no escaping the fact that the slogan “All the troubles in Russia are caused by Judeo-Masonic conspiracy” became more tolerable (an increase of 12.6 %).

Therefore, it should be recognized that the cognitive ideological matrix in student consciousness remains open to the influence of far-right ideas, and the frustrations generated by the “chilling” of the political regime may very well strengthen these negative values and attitudes. However, it is impossible to predict the direction of crystallization of these concepts in the next cycle of their flickering. Considering the fact that the slogan “Stop feeding other nations!” is more about social justice than about the resentment against other nations and races (the latter is refuted by the clear antipathy to the slogan “Russia is only for Russians!”), the far-left crystallization of the conceptual frame of this flickering concept is entirely possible. But at the moment, these concepts are in the shadow of student consciousness, increasingly giving way to liberal concepts.

DISCUSSIONS

Before summing up the analysis, one should return to the problem outlined at the beginning of the article: to explain the transition from heterogeneous consciousness to a systematized ideology, and vice versa. In solving this problem, one cannot agree with the opinion of Michael Frieden about the final erosion of ideological structures. The empirical data obtained in the course of the research indicate the presence in the student's mind of several matrix structures that set the ranges of interpretations of the information received about the facts of social reality: (1) fundamental in the student environment are the universalist liberal values of personal freedom, human rights, etc.; (2) this liberal matrix is influenced by concepts that migrated from right-wing ideologies, such as “nation”, “empire”, anti-liberalism, anti-feminism, etc.; (3) under the influence of these concepts, the evolution of the liberal matrix takes place - the original liberal-universalist concepts are particularized, and the initially particular concepts of a nation, people, etc., receive a universalist interpretation. As a result, there are several types of cognitive-ideological matrices that determine the respondents' perception of the facts of social reality.

CONCLUSION

Summing up the research conducted, the following conclusions can be drawn. The concept of the cognitive-value matrix of ideology describes a pre-reflective (and therefore politically neutral) environment in which protoelements of political ideologies are formed from the elements of the sedimented social experience of an individual. This is the same “zero level” in which the ideological “protoplasm” arises through the formation of an individual's predisposition to one or another, and more often to several ideologies at once. Moreover, unlike ideology, the matrix is insensitive to contradiction, since the elements of the matrix are not subject to reflection. They have reflected already in the process of the formation of proto-ideological elements. And that is why the protoelements of various ideologies can be stored in the individual consciousness without generating cognitive dissonance. And the allocation of the concept as the main “gene” of

ideology allows us to describe this phenomenon in terms of the cognitive-evolutionary approach.

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