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Guest Editors' Note: "Dialogues on democracy in transition: Social-psychological perspectives". Special issue celebrating the centenary of Eraldo De Grada's birth

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Abstract

This special issue celebrates the centenary of Eraldo De Grada' birth, founder of the Roman School of Social Psychology. De Grada's scholarly legacy is defined by his commitment to methodological rigor and a profound awareness of the interdependence between psychological, social, and cultural factors. His approach, which rejected reductionist perspectives, remains essential for analyzing contemporary society.

As modern representative democracies face unprecedented challenges—characterized by the rise of populism, deepening social inequalities, and the fragility of political institutions—this collection invokes De Grada's vision to address these transitions. The issue features eight contributions that explore the intersection of micro-level ideological and motivational dynamics and macro-level social and cultural processes that underlie the "democracy's precarious state of health". Topics range from the normalization of political extremism and right-wing populism to anti-neoliberal attitudes, polarization and/or conservative shift, and the restorative-punitive dynamics of justice. By integrating theoretical analysis with practical applications, these articles demonstrate the enduring heuristic validity of De Grada's work. Collectively, they reaffirm the role of social psychology in understanding and countering current involutional processes to support a more equal and free society.

Keywords: Eraldo De Grada; Social Psychology; Democracy; Populism; Authoritarianism; Social Inequalities; Polarization; Political Extremism; Research Methodology; Epistemic/Economic Uncertainty

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Guest Editors' Note

Former students of Eraldo De Grada (1925-2012), the founder and first leader of the Roman School of Social Psychology (see Mecacci, 1995, p. 28), have decided to dedicate a special issue to celebrate the centenary of his birth. The title "Dialogues on Democracy in Transition: Social-Psychological Perspectives" evokes the context where Eraldo De Grada took his first steps. Europe blossomed, and democracy recovered, in the years after the end of the Second World War and the dark years of Fascist and Nazi dictatorships. Scientists were called upon to find answers to the economic, social, and psychological causes of the involutional processes that had led to the outbreak of the war and to the atrocities committed by the dictatorships that had destabilized Western democratic structures in the first half of the twentieth century. The end of the war ushered in a period of significant intellectual momentum that unfolded in a world in transition and was marked by demands for social change, to which social scientists were called upon to contribute. The response to this call had not always been effective elsewhere, such as in the United States. From 1954 onwards, mainstream Social Psychology (SP), with its experimentalist and laboratory turn, was characterized by a sort of escape from social reality, in contrast to what had occurred during the war years when the very same SP had been actively involved in the war effort (Sensales, 2025). During those same years, a tendency was developing in Europe to oppose the American turn that culminated in the so-called SP "crisis" of the 1970s. Thus, in Europe, critical perspectives and approaches took shape in order to revitalize our discipline. De Grada was a prominent member of that group of scholars who maintained an openness to the social as a foundational aspect of their scientific practice, without ever losing the firm ground of a solid methodological basis. He had directly experienced the impact of the loss of freedom during his time as a prisoner of war in Kenya from 1940 to 1947. That experience may have led him to take his first steps in the research world, engaging in the study of the authoritarian personality (Adorno et al., 1950). This study had strong social and political significance. The analysis of Adorno and colleagues (1950) would lead him to author the Italian translation of the authoritarianism scale and to implement surveys to test its validity (De Grada et al., 1975). In this effort to interpret social-psychological dynamics, he always avoided reductionist psychologizing distortions, aware of a continuous interchange between micro- and macro-level processes. Thus, at the conclusion of the volume entitled "Introduction to Social Psychology," he wrote, "Authoritarianism can be modified only by stripping it of its functions, its valorizations, its social supports, and this can only occur through a profound transformation of the social system that encourages and nourishes it" (De Grada, 1972, p. 227). Thus, his commitment as a researcher was based on the awareness of the close interdependence between psychological, social, and cultural factors. This ample view always accompanied him across his scientific endeavors and, together with a sharp attention to methodological rigor, was one of his great legacies to his students and colleagues.

In contemporary times, we find ourselves in a new transition that, however, seems to be the opposite of that experienced in the post-war period. At that time, the society that emerged from a period of great political and social instability sought to build a more equal and freer reality capable of curbing the power of the oligarchies that had brought the world to the brink of destruction. The blossoming of the European Union was one of the most remarkable epiphenomena of this global process. Today, about eighty years later, the rise of populism signals democracy's precarious state of health. As Nadia Urbinati (2019), a student of Norberto Bobbio, points out, populism emerged in response to the failure of two promises of representative democracy (i.e., the "broken promises of democracy" outlined by Bobbio, 2014), namely: 1) the reduction of economic and social inequalities; and 2) the downsizing of national and global oligarchies. These two promises have not only been unfulfilled but have become their opposites, with unprecedented growth in inequalities fueled by fierce economic competition and an authoritarian or hierarchical inegalitarianism that treats politics as a race/contest capable of securing the winner a superior position in the governance of society. Thus, a process emerges that allows a single individual to seize power by proclaiming themself the representative of a collective entity, the people. The leader/individual offers to effect remedial change concerning existing injustices, even at the cost of violating all democratic rules. In this way, a "disfigured democracy" (Urbinati, 2014) is created, in which populism in power attacks representative democracy by implementing all possible measures to maintain its position of power indefinitely. It is a process that demonstrates how populism requires democracy to assert itself, yet must deny it to preserve its position of dominance. Once populists have seized power, in the name of their presumed moral superiority, they claim to maintain it forever by altering the rules of respect for minorities and alternation, which are the basis of representative democracy. Autocratic systems thus spread, in which individual and social freedoms are challenged, initiating a transition from democracy to hybrid or decidedly authoritarian regimes in response to a generalized framework of uncertainty that has made the broken promises of representative democracy more salient. As Sensales (2024) points out, citing Casas-Zamora (2022), the number of countries moving towards an authoritarian direction continues to triple the number of countries oriented towards a democratic direction, demonstrating how representative democracy is an open system with historically determined forms and, therefore, subject to historical mutations, of which populism is a specificity. A conservative, no longer emancipatory, democracy can thus be affirmed. Through identity-based discourses, it builds divisions and barriers, erasing rights grounded in recognition of diversity and the values of free choice. In this complex and contradictory context, these processes are not determined once and for all; rather, they require rejecting an apocalyptic vision and recognizing the significance of the symptoms that have allowed populism to assert itself, in order to counter them.

In this highly problematic context, social psychologists are once again called upon to apply their expertise to existing social balances, disseminate knowledge, and understand that knowledge can be transformed into operational guidelines capable of resolving ongoing involutional processes.

Building on the tradition of the Roman School of Social Psychology founded by Eraldo De Grada, and celebrating the centenary of his birth, we are presenting here a special issue

dedicated to him, consisting of 8 contributions aimed at identifying and analyzing (1) micro-level ideological and motivational dynamics and macro-level social and cultural processes that underlie political extremism and polarization processes, support for a stable social system, anti-neoliberal attitudes, the individual shift toward more conservative positions, the emergence of right-wing populism, the contrasting orientations toward restorative and punitive attitudes, (2) implications and consequences of these phenomena at individual, group, and societal levels.

We are excited about the opportunity this initiative has offered us to express our deep thanks for Eraldo De Grada's tireless and prolific academic work, in the hope of having gathered his teachings. We are equally deeply grateful to Eraldo's friends, colleagues, and students who contributed to the realization of this special issue, which we briefly present below.

Specifically, the contribution of Moskalenko and Kruglanski (article 1 in this issue) examines how extremism—traditionally understood as marginal, deviant, or pathological—comes to be mainstreamed within societies. The authors first introduce the psychology of extremism at the individual level, emphasizing the need for significance, identity fusion, and self-sacrifice. They then extend this framework to the societal level, examining how institutions, media environments, and cultural narratives reward extremity while penalizing moderation. Finally, they analyze how these processes enable the transition from fringe extremism to its normalization in mainstream political culture and everyday life.

The study by Aiello, Tesi, and Di Santo (article 2 in this issue) investigated how individuals with high levels of belief in a just world (BJW) and social dominance orientation (SDO) rely on essentialist explanations to cope with employment uncertainty. In turn, the essentialism was expected to diminish the support for workplace diversity, an important psychological foundation of organizational inclusion. Results supported their hypothesis. The findings underscore important implications for fostering employees' appreciation of diversity and strengthening social inclusion in the workplace.

Ludovico, Milani, and Bonaiuto (article 3 in this issue) study digital inter-organizational communications within an epistemic and economic uncertain arena (bioplastic economy): from one side, the content of their online public communication is automatically analyzed via NLP (Natural Language Processing) techniques in terms of UN SDGs value alignment; from the other side, each organization online centrality is measured via social network analysis. Results show - within a contested landscape of divergent values and normative orientations - how organizations' positions converge and diverge onto discursive coalitions where self-categorization normative prototipicality associates with network centrality, especially among the most central organizations.

The study of Chirumbolo (article 4 in this issue) examined the Italian adaptation of the Anti-Neoliberal Attitudes Scale (ANAS) and provided preliminary evidence of its psychometric properties. All ANAS dimensions (Multicultural Ideology, Racism and Sexism Awareness, Inequality Consciousness, and Communitarian Values) were negatively associated with right-wing authoritarianism (RWA), social dominance orientation (SDO), and right-wing political orientation. Taken together, these findings provide encouraging preliminary support for the Italian ANAS as a multidimensional measure of anti-neoliberal attitudes.

Caprara's contribution (article 5 in this issue), starting from the contemporary symptoms of political malaise—such as the decline of political parties, the obsolescence of established leadership, and rising voter abstention— and in defense of the left/right dichotomy, raises profound concerns regarding the state and future of liberal democracy. According to his observations, the ideals of democracy are unlikely to be realized unless citizens genuinely embrace its values and actively contribute to its functioning. This necessitates a more thorough understanding of the personal determinants of political preferences and participation, as well as a careful assessment of the value of ideological frameworks in bridging citizens' needs and aspirations with political offerings and public policies.

Across three studies, the contribution of Pierro, Rizzoli, Albarello, and Kruglanski (article 6 in this issue) examined whether politically left-wing individuals with a need for cognitive closure or under conditions of threat-related uncertainty can shift toward conservative positions supporting the strength of social norms and sanctioning for deviance from norms within societies (i.e., the desire for cultural tightness). Consistent with the conservative shift hypothesis, the results demonstrate how societal uncertainty and epistemic motivations point to the precarity of freedom and the fragility of democratic societies, highlighting the conditions and mechanisms that can lead to the embrace of anti-democratic instances.

The article by Sensales, Di Cicco, Prislei, and Sorvillo (article 7 in this issue) presents a literature review on Giorgia Meloni, the first woman Prime Minister of a government that, for the first time, saw all right-wing parties, including radicals, at the helm of Italy. The review highlights Meloni's relationship with populism, both in style—agentic, top-down, and emotional—and in content —migrant-centric. The studies presented are also analyzed with respect to the salience of gender identity, as analyzed in Meloni's direct language use in her parliamentary speeches, her social media communications, her statements regarding the Fanpage scandal, and her followers' responses to her Facebook posts.

Using a qualitative study design, the contribution by Perrella, Zarbo, Lodi, Magnano, and Patrizi (article 8 in this issue) aims to provide preliminary evidence for the plausibility of a restorative-punitive framework and to explore its potential dimensions. The results revealed a polarization in representations of the meaning of justice, highlighting, on the one hand, themes of control and punishment and, on the other, themes of support, rehabilitation, equity, and relationships.

Taken together, the eight contributions testify to the vast heuristic value of Eraldo De Grada's legacy across all levels of social psychology's scientific endeavor: theories, methods, and social implications.

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