

Ideas, Ideals and Ideologies in Intercultural Discourse and Their Impact on the Image of the Other

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Abstract. This paper is concerned with *ideas* in terms of intellectual constructs being the core units of *ideals* and *ideologies*, the (un-)conscious ways they are made up and all of them performing two competing tasks. In the course of acculturation they shape our cultural identity and cause sociocultural affiliation. But when it comes to perceiving other cultures it is exactly this specific texture of our cultural disposition that turns into an insurmountable cognitive handicap. Despite all and knowingly that in mostly any intercultural discourse *ideals* and *ideologies* are interwoven with tactical ulterior motifs, it is essential to initiate a process of emotionally and mentally disassociating ourselves from them in order to catch better sight of their specific texture by taking up a quasi-distant position. In case we fail in perpetuating that intellectual game we still might acquire practical skills for decision-making and responsibility in an intercultural setting, but we will miss out on both gaining substantial cognisance of the respective other and last but not least raising awareness for our very own self-conception. That is exactly what the potential of intercultural communication is about. Our own intellectual precondition partly becomes perceptible only by checking it against the immediate experience of otherness on the long-run.

The Impact of Ideas, Ideals and Ideologies on the Image of the Other

Focussing on the human capability to create, perceive and communicate images in the sense of intellectual constructs in general, *ideas* in the sense of Image Science are any outcome of a human mindset and thus the core units that make up our intellectual inner self [1]. Just within one culture group only – and even more when two or more are involved in a discourse – often no final consensus is to be reached on whether an *ideology* is in fact an *ideology*, an *ideal* or a mere *idea*. Notwithstanding that no one can escape this precondition we have to be aware – especially when it comes to contemplating other cultures – that the respective very own *ideas*, *ideals* and *ideologies* used as criteria (as well as the particular mode of thought that brings them about) bear a fundamental cognitive handicap on the part of the beholder. Mental images of another culture consist of transpositions and projections of points of view and perceptions of the external beholder's culture of origin onto differently conditioned circumstances and phenomena furnished with (possibly indecipherable) meaning by another cultural setting.

(Un-)written and (un-)spoken *ideals* – usually a combination of several *ideas* – make up a culture group's conventions of living together and they guarantee stability and a reliable framework for their members. Therefore the big majority of mankind as a matter of course claims their own *ideals* intuitively or by explicit conviction to be of high value or even accredit them with a universal character, while they are often not equally valued by outsiders at the same time.[i]

Ideas, Ideals and Ideologies: Semantic and Etymological Outline on their Double Nature

Etymologically speaking the three terms *idea*, *ideal* and *ideology* have a common semantic background. The origin of the shared lexical morpheme is the Greek term ἰδέα (shape, emergence,

appearance, prototype). As for the word formation of *ideal* its morpheme has been modified by suffixing a neoclassical formative (in so doing shifting the original meaning onto a more abstract level with the connotation of a state of perfection, and thus designating something to strive for), whereas *ideology* is a composition of the previously mentioned morpheme with *λόγος* (teaching, doctrine, set of beliefs). In addition to examining its etymological origin the latter term's actual *signifié* becomes intelligible when considering the semantic changes it has gone through ever since its establishment in the period of late Enlightenment in Europe (see Figure 1 below).

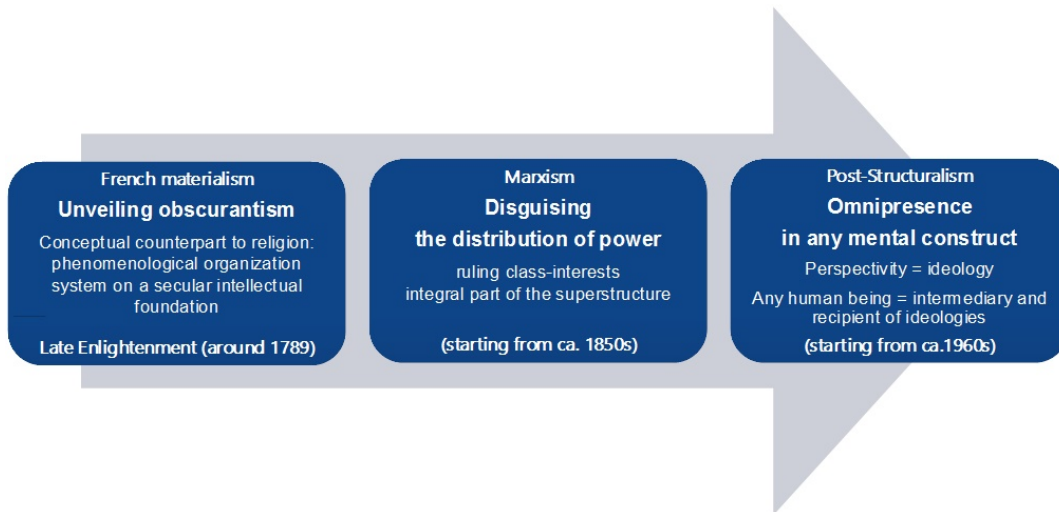


Figure 1. Outline on the etymology of the term *ideology* from the 18th to the 20th century.

Emanated from the seminal intellectual circles preceding the French Revolution, *ideology* originally was meant to overcome the discourse predominance as formerly exerted by the clergy. In that sense *ideology* in the first instance had an anti-religious connotation (in terms of unveiling what their followers had called obscurantism) while its goal was to create and legitimate a new phenomenological organization system on a plain secular intellectual foundation. About half a century later the term *ideology* made its way into the history of political thought.[ii] In Marxism *ideology* has a strong socio-/politico-economical connotation in terms of describing *ideology* as an integral part of the superstructure (supposedly with the purpose of disguising the actual distribution of power). Later on the post-structuralist point of view as developed starting from the late the 1960ies came to an even more radical conclusion by stating the omnipresence of *ideologies* in intellectual constructs of any kind. According to them *perspective* equals *ideology* which hints at – and here we've come full circle – nothing but a double character of both *ideas* and *ideals* being *ideologies* at the same time and thus, at perceptivity as all-embracing precondition of any outcome of the human mind.

The Inevitable Impact of the Beholder's Specific Idea(l) Realm on the Image of the Other

Intellectual constructs respectively *ideas* are any intellectual outcome of a human mind. It may be assumed that single *ideas* are the core units that make up a mindset and its procedural functionality which both rule our entire way of thinking and last but not least result in actions with consequences ranging from insignificant to lethal. In the context of perceiving other cultures they determine our attitude towards (representatives of) another culture and how we look upon it.

Up to that point it does not matter whether *ideas* came into being unconsciously or the respective bearer claims a certain level of reflection on how and why they became what they actually are and mean to him/her. It will be briefly pointed out in the following why there is no way to escape our very own cultural precondition and why we can grasp no more than vague contours of it in the end. As for *ideals* – usually consisting of a combination of several *ideas* – another decisive factor comes into play. Among other constituents various (un-)written and (un-)spoken *ideals* make up a culture

group's conventions of living together, both ideally and practically speaking, and they guarantee stability and a reliable framework for their members. Therefore it appears to be only as a matter of course that the big majority of mankind claims their *ideals* intuitively or by explicit conviction to be of high value or even accredit them with a universal character – which is where a critical point is reached as shall be outlined in the following.

Why we Naturally Adhere to our very own Ideals and Occasionally Peddle them

Even though it may occur that within one culture group or society no final consensus is to be reached on whether an *ideology* is in fact an *ideology*, an *ideal* or no more than an *idea*, as false conclusion a transferability of *ideals* onto other cultural systems or even a universal validity is often automatically assumed and not rarely missionary efforts (often on the pretext of other interests as to be shown later on) are undertaken. At the same time any attempt of publicly questioning, deconstructing or even discrediting of the respective own *ideals* usually is either considered an offence to the cultural integrity by the big majority or met by incomprehension or ignorance. This has been demonstrated e.g. by certain post-structuralists who got on many of their fellow Westerners' bad side by deconstructing Western *ideals* including core values, such as Foucault describing *humanism* consistently as folding screen on whose back side terrible and unimaginable pacts are being made [3], or Adorno claiming *freedom* to be an invention made up by the ruling class and an *ideology* serving the system to rule ordinary men [4].

It is one thing if such a challenge emerges from inside a culture group, but in case of outsiders contesting foreign *ideal* conceptions or even undertaking attempts of imposing their very own ones, then it is certainly a completely different scenario. The sensitivities of a culture group might be affected much more, and accordingly the reaction is most likely at least protective – if not a defensive or even hostile demeanour. The simple reason therefore is that a proved and time-tested sociocultural framework (as outlined by native *ideals*) promises reliability and safety. Besides the double nature of *ideals* (as shown above) there are indeed clues to be found within the Western intellectual history that argue in favour of the contrary. There convincing arguments questioning the existence of any objective truth in general and in regards to the image of the other in particular [5]. Using the example of *ideal* conceptions in terms of moral codices several meta-ethical moral relativists refuse to acknowledge any sort of objectivity for various reasons: Montaigne considers the emergence of moral codices as a matter of chance [6], Hobbes regarded upon them as a mere social contract for pragmatical reasons [7], Hume stated moral standards being dependent on favoured values while Marx emphasized any code of ethics being exploited by social groups [9]. In addition there is a philosophical point of view focusing on the image of the other in particular, pointing out that no culture group would be either capable or in charge of interpreting another [10]. According to those arguments one culture group's *ideals* are not being technically superior to another one's. Any claim to leadership not only in regards to power politics but also in terms of *ideal* conceptions has to be regarded upon with great caution as assuming a moral superiority is just a single step away from supposing a general superiority.

But in the end all the intellectual findings and positions mentioned previously are ruled out by a simple but far-ranging fact: What evolutionary speaking counts in the end is survival rather than cognisance and knowledge. As the human mind (including any of its outcome) is reigned by this precondition [11], and as for the big majority of mankind a major guarantor for survival is the safe harbour of their native culture, it is only natural that humans mostly adhere to exactly the *ideal* reference framework they naturally are familiar with or are drawn towards. As culture-defining necessity and crucial part of this reference framework *ideals* are in turn no more than *ideas* which – by the majority within one culture and/or on part of certain social groups, institutions or discourse leaders of any kind – are considered to be of particular value (respectively benefit, or both). Maslow offers another possible explanation for this pattern according to which *ideals* cater to a universal (?) [iii] human longing for transcendence which in turn ranks top level in his hierarchy of needs [12], [13].

In consideration of what has been previously mentioned, from there it is just one logical step ahead to claim a superiority of the respective very own *ideals* – regardless of not only the lack of knowledge of another cultural setting and its global preconditions but also the own limits of perceiving and thus grasping it. Still that is what actually happens worldwide in private and especially in public life as well as around the negotiating tables. When it comes to own *ideals* being used by any of the communicants in an inter-/multicultural dia-/polylog or them even being imposed onto other cultural settings with different preferences, one question that arises is whether the propagator did so unknowingly or what purpose for (s)he avails him-/herself of an *ideal* in that very situation. A mutual consent – on whether such attempts are undertaken solely for the a “good” (though possibly misdirected) cause or interwoven with ulterior motifs such as selfish intentions – is most unlikely to happen. The simple reason therefore is that there is no generally accepted objective instance to judge on that, or even that – when it is about cultural phenomena in particular – there is no objectivity at all [14].

With cognisance of the other and raising awareness for the very own self-conception in mind any setting similar to the one mentioned previously is certainly nothing but a discursive dead-end road. In order to gain knowledge on the culturally determined intellectual precondition of both the other and the self, the ideal discourse setting would be a long-term process, based on mutual sympathy and faith, free of domination, on an equal footing and with common interest in that field.

Summary

Semantics and etymology of the terms *ideal* and *ideology* and the post-structuralist position in particular suggest an all-embracing precondition of the entire human mind which amongst others is culturally determined. Globalisation in that regards is a double-edged sword. It provides us with the means to easily cross boundaries and makes them become blurred at the same time. If there is no strange *other* then we are lacking the mirror to catch our cultural reflection. The more differing there is and the more different angles we have to regard upon ourselves from, the more cognisance of ourselves is likely to be reached.

Endnotes

[i] One example is the Western interpretation of human rights in contrast to the valuation of exactly these specific intellectual goods in other culture areas. Using the example of German civic education publications (1961-2006) a detailed analysis by means of a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is being undertaken and prepared for publication by the author of this paper attempting a multi-perspective evaluation of the respective discourse characteristics.

[ii] The original manuscript of *Die deutsche Ideologie* (The German ideology) by Marx and Engels (dating 1845) has not been completely published until 1932 though.[2]

[iii] Claiming universal validity – as outlined before – has to be dealt with great caution in the field of knowledge, too, which is taken into account by the bracketed question mark. (Self-)appointed spokesmen of the whole world population – meaning well or not – tend to ignore that it is a thin line between ignorance and (conceptual, moral etc.) delusions of grandeur.

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