

PREAMBLE

THE POWER OF IDEAS

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The previous number of *Orbis Idearum* was concerned with the concept of *power*. The concept of power is complex, multilayered, and in many ways a hybrid. Power is of fundamental importance for understanding our world – not only particular philosophical schools. It is often used, but it is often overused. Importantly, since the middle of the 20th century, the concept of power came to replace an idea that had played a central role in many aspects of social life, namely, *culture*. Eric R. Wolf spoke to the changing dynamics surrounding our understanding of power in *Envisioning Power: Ideologies of Dominance and Crisis* (1999), particularly when referring to what he calls the “quickly sinking” concept of culture and the “quickly rising” concept of power. Such an understanding of power, and its relation to culture, is very different than what we saw at the end of the 19th century.

German thinking on culture was heavily influenced by the writings of Samuel von Pufendorf (1632-1694) and Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803). At the end of the 19th century, Heinrich Rickert worked to draw a line between the natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*) and the study of culture, or the “cultural sciences” (*Kulturwissenschaften*). In 1888, he received the title of Dr. phil on the basis of his work *Zur Lehre von der Definition (The Theory of Definition)*. In the introduction to this piece he refers to himself as a *Doctor of Cultural Sciences (Doktor der Kulturwissenschaften)*. As anachronistic as this may have sounded at the time, he was successfully working to draw a clearer demarcation between the study of nature and the study of culture. This distinction took root within the German sciences, while it had a more limited influence outside the German-speaking world.

Importantly, the German notion of *Kultur* would take a fundamentally different shape than the Franco-British understanding of “civilization”. For this reason, one encounters talk of clashes of *civilizations* in England and France, but clashes of *cultures* in Germany (as exemplified in Bismark’s *Kulturkampf*). From the second half of the 19th century until the middle of the 20th century, this important difference would find expression in three bloody conflicts that shaped the history of Europe: The Franco-Prussian War, World War I, and World War II. Following the

end of the Second World War and the creation of such international organizations as the United Nations and UNESCO, the scope of the German understanding of culture would expand and then take a definitive turn (in its relationship to the notion of power).

In the second half of the 20th century, the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss used the opposition between culture and nature as a springboard for thinking about human creation. Thus, at that period we see the concept of culture beginning to take on the ability to cross outside German thinking, and to extend beyond the traditional understandings of culture in Germany; it began to extend beyond regional, national and even global understandings of culture. What is more, it became not only the milieu in which researchers were understood to work, but also itself the object of scientific study. But, as reflected in the thinking of Eric Wolf at the end of the 20th century, the concept of culture that had ruled so many areas of social life until then would be replaced by a concept that could be more readily used in the newly developing scientific spirit of the times. That concept was *power*.

In writing about freedom at the end of the 20th century, in his *The Proper Study of Man* (1998), Isaiah Berlin would refer to Heinrich Heine's text entitled *De l'Allemagne* (literally "From Germany"). This book was written by Heine while he was a refugee in France. This title bears important resemblance to Madame de Staël's book by the same title, *De l'Allemagne*, published in 1813. In this text, the writer-philosopher Heine warns the French about the *Power of Ideas* (*Macht der Ideen*), with *power* (*Macht*) being understood also in the sense of *violence* (*Gewalt*). Heinrich Heine wrote about how, in the silence of the philosopher's study, powerful ideas can be born; ideas that have the ability to destroy the whole of civilization. Heine's book, *De l'Allemagne*, was translated by Heine himself into German as *Zur Geschichte der Religion und Philosophie in Deutschland* (*The History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany*). The German title places emphasis on what is arguably the book's most important element, namely, the union of religion and philosophy. The union of religion and philosophy was necessary in order to understand the German mind. Here religion is primarily understood through the prism of Lutheranism, as set before the backdrop of Greek mythology. Philosophy itself is presented as the Goddess of Wisdom, with a shield in her left hand, and in her right hand, a sword from which there is no defense. In this image, many are the symbolic links with the rise of Germany in the 1870s, an era that would witness the formation of a Germany not only united, but also blood-spattered and without pardon. For a long time, this book was banned in Germany and Heine remained in exile. The same era would, however, not only be colored by the *Power of Ideas* (*Macht der Ideen*), but also by the *Power of Concepts* (*Macht der Begriffe*). A wonderful example of this is found in the formation, in the spirit of *Kultur* and *Bildung*, of the Humboldt University, an institution that radically changed the scientific foundations upon which modern Germany would be built.

Isaiah Berlin's return to the power of ideas published in *The Proper Study of Man* can be understood as a barometer tracing the development of the idea of power, sometimes to the left and sometimes to the right. Thus, it is a tool that can help us to make sense out of many of the undertakings of our modern world. And yet, even with such guides at our disposal, we nevertheless often forget the roots of this idea – an idea that has shaped our world to such a considerable degree. For this reason, it is to these roots that we dedicate the fourth edition of *Orbis Idearum*. These roots have grown and spread to all corners of the world, and are now firmly entrenched – whether we know it or not – in the soil upon which we all tread, be it in France, Germany or Italy, the United Kingdom or the United States, Mexico or Poland. Power is indeed a complex, multilayered, and polysemous idea. It can be expressed in any number of ways, such as *possibility*, *potentiality*, *modality*, *violence*, *strength*, or *control* – a list that could go on and on. Therefore, in order to better understand such an important, but complex idea, it is essential to understand its history.

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