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**MODIFICATION OF THE ROLE AND STATUS OF SOCIAL IDEALS  
IN MODERN SOCIETY**

*SUMMARY. This article focuses on the contrariety of the notion of an "ideal". If we strictly adhere to the definition, "social ideals" may be only considered as "ideals implicitly", but they undergo degradation in modern developed society.*

*KEY WORDS. Ideals, social ideals, aspiration, model, objectivity, values.*

Surprisingly, the notion of "ideal" has preserved the meaning attributed to it by Greek philosophy. Modern dictionaries provide exactly identical definitions: an ideal is a paragon, something perfect, a priority objective of aspirations. More conscientious authors of dictionaries give the main features of the ideal, instead of listings separated by commas: in one sense the ideal is a "paragon", in the other sense it's "an objective of an activity" (e.g. Ozhegov's Definition Dictionary). Following the logic of the ancestor of Greek idealism, both senses are in a close cause and effect relationship. Excellence, foretype and idea (considered by Plato as synonyms of modern understanding of "an ideal") are custom-made and exist forever, moreover, people's souls contemplated these ideals some time ago, therefore people know them for certain and they can't help aspiring to them. Such aspiration is caused by not only the yearning of the soul isolated from its welfare, but in general, it represents a kind of a common law: "... ideas exist in nature as if represented by paragons, the other things are similar to them and the core of such resemblance and the very involvement of things into ideas lies only in assimilation and in nothing else" [1; 354].

Needless to say, even Plato's contemporaries criticised the apprehension of solid truth and eternal ideas (ideals). Thus, it's particularly strange that the definition of the notion still includes apparently equivalent and non-contradicting parts. We shall try to understand where the contradiction lies.

Understanding "an ideal" as the height of excellence or as a model means introducing an objective side into the assessment of something. Excellence means a gradation, a comparison, a bigger or a smaller degree of completeness as interpreted by the assessing subject, or some reflection. An assumption saying that it's difficult to justify the choice of one or another model (of a thing, a subject, a touch of nature...) as an ideal seems quite convincing, however it is certainly possible to set the ideal in a descriptive way, which is easily and even frequently done by means of public opinion polls. For example, the respondents are able to answer questions like: "What is your ideal of a man/a woman?" without any additional instructions; in the same way it is possible to voice the assessment of something "non-ideal",

e.g. a teacher may consider the answer of a student as such, and if requested the teacher may explain what is missing to make the answer "ideal". It is clear that a person is often guided not by a comprehensive reflection, but by intuition. At the same time, a person does not establish the norms and the rules which fully describe the understanding of an ideal. However, "a sample" or "a paragon" certainly has objective features as seen by the assessing subject.

The second part of the notion ("a priority objective of aspirations") confirms that personal feelings and activities are as important as the comparison of two objects on the basis of certain parameters. The two objects represent a paragon and the things on which attention is focused. Here we observe a contradiction which is possible only through ignorance, according to the opinion of Plato. Firstly, a person often bases his/her activity not on an ideal but on an optimal result, thus ideal brickwork is not required for plastering, therefore, for the sake of time and efforts saving, a person may voluntarily prefer just good quality brickwork. Plato himself recognized voluntary rejection of the ideal as inevitable, e.g. an ideal name adequately expressing the essence of an object automatically doubles it: "Cratylus, ridiculous things would happen to the names and the objects bearing the above names if they were fully identical to each other. Then, everything would be dissociated, and nobody would be able to define where it is situated and where its name is" [2; 671]. Undoubtedly, the saying is a little naive but still topical, if we do not consider conveyor belt pressworking of inanimate objects, which does not in any way destroy our understanding of reality (e.g. a series of identical screws does not insult our taste and does not scare by its external indistinguishability). Even the aspiration to have a model shape or appearance implies that apart from precisely calculated proportions, a person should be individual, i.e. any ideal will be personal for every concrete subject, or it will allow insignificant deviation from the ideal. Secondly, excellence related to any kind of thing may not be connected in any way with the life of a subject or enter into a value-based dissonance with it: a doctor does not require the perfect body mobility of a ballet dancer and does not yearn for it, and committing a perfect crime is not an objective for a law-abiding person.

Therefore, an ideal is not only associated with a process of comparison, but also with the scope of values of the subject on the whole. The values within their meaning are so important for each definite "I" that the "I" really aspires to them and gives an emotional response to a value-loaded object or a situation. It means that, on the one hand, the ideal contains the subject's understanding of the world and its gradations, and it represents a certain generalization able to be comprehended; on the other hand, it has a significant direct impact on the given person. It is clear that it would be completely incorrect to consider ideal anything a person evaluates as "perfect" in a logical way, and at the same time it is wrong to consider ideal anything a person actively aspires to at the present time. For example, a student aspires to reach the objective (to obtain a diploma) because he/she is tired of studies. It is clear that a student is interested in getting the diploma, but it has nothing in common with an ideal (studies, success, freedom or something else). It is quite difficult to define something as an ideal of the given subject from the perspective of an outside observer.

One of the difficulties of the definition is that a simple thing may be ideal even though this thing does not seem the greatest among similar things, and this should

be evident to the assessing subject. For example, the overcoat of Akaky Akakievich from N.V. Gogol's short story of the same title is definitely an ideal (it becomes clear to the readers due to the author's art of narration) and not just a dream. In this story the highly valuable idea to have a new overcoat cannot come true otherwise, since the main character does not have enough imagination, money and demands. The overcoat becomes a symbol of happiness, i.e. an ideal. The choice of a poor government clerk is ridiculous and at the same time unbiased: he is mistaken but it is justified by his reasons and his own criteria of what is best (even if it deals with such a small matter thing as the choice of fur for the collar).

The eccentricity of choice of some ideal keeps it away from the temptation to try a mask of commonality. The overcoat was the ideal of Akaky Akakievich and not of someone else; however, a great number of the most common ideas of perfection were fixed in each society as its "ideals" and as unbiased benefit. The social ideals drawn from public morality and the ruling ideology are criteria and samples free from individual aspiration (a society is a community unable to wish for the same "perfection" at a certain time through the will of all the personalities who are its members. Let's note that this does not mean that a society is unable to desire something, e.g. to end state aggression or to emerge from an economic crisis. But it does not deal with an ideal, i.e. with the model of an aspect of social life). That is why social ideals cannot be named "pure ideals", they are potential ideals.

The difference between the static criteria of comparing with a model on the one hand, and with aspiration and activity on the other hand, was mostly evident in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, mainly in the bipolar world offering competing models of social organization. Representatives of the bourgeois world praising individualism at the same time revealed the problem of the genesis of major thrilling ideals. The "model" in capitalist society tends to degenerate into a somewhat average respectable "standard" of life, and it is unclear what is the source of new high models for which to waste one's life without regret. Representatives of the socialist world praising collective efforts and the primacy of the common over the private came across "the contraband" status of ideals in general. The ideals were dogmatically set and delineated; therefore they did not allow any individual spiritual work over the elaboration of new social or private ideals. It was described not only in philosophy but also in popular literary works. It is interesting to compare two quotations from "Steppenwolf" by H. Hesse and from a wonderful book for young people, "Schwambrania" by L. Kassil. Both books were written in 1927 (though "Schwambrania" was edited by L. Kassil in 1935, but nevertheless the books may be considered contemporaneous as far as they were written within the same historical period — between the two World Wars).

Here is the voice from the capitalist camp: "... we see that during the time when strong natures govern, a petty bourgeois is driven to bay; but a bourgeois never dies, and one day he is likely to dominate the world. How is that possible? Neither the multiplicity of his herd, nor virtue, nor common sense, nor organization seems to be unable to retrieve him from ruin. Not a single medicine shall prolong the life of a person whose life forces are damaged from the very beginning. But still the petty bourgeoisie is strong, it lives and prospers. Why?

The answer is: thanks to the wolves. In fact, the life force of the petty bourgeoisie is not based on the qualities of its standard representatives, but on the qualities of

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an uncommonly large number of outsiders who join the petty bourgeoisie due to the indistinctness and extensibility of their ideals. A great number of strong and wild natures are always found among the petty bourgeoisie. ... the real petty bourgeoisie is surrounded, as a core, by large sections of the human race, thousands of lives and minds, who outgrew the bourgeoisie, who are driven to ignore the stipulations and to levitate towards the Absolute, but are still linked to the community of the petty bourgeoisie by childish feelings, and still sensibly infected with the state of its life force being ruined, therefore somehow deep-rooted in the petty bourgeoisie, somehow dependent, obliged and obedient to it. It is this way since the petty bourgeoisie follows the principle which is opposite to the principle of the great — “He, who is not against me, is for me” [3].

And here’s the veiled voice from the socialist camp, the voice that fears as the devil fears holy water: “And if someone says: what could be our business in all that; we don’t need either an illusion or a false pretence to maintain our enthusiasm... This is our great happiness. But does it mean that we... do not need any dream? A class having power in its hands which really changes the world in due course is always inclined to realism, but is also inclined to romanticism”. One should understand by romanticism the same thing as Lenin meant by dream. And this is not anymore an unattainable fantastic star and not a comforting chimera. It is just our plan, our five-year plan and further great plans for five years. Our aspiration to move forward through the impediments is revealed here. This is the “practical idealism”, the great role of which for materialists was mentioned by Engels...” [4; 261].

It is possible to catch a discord between the model and the aspiration to it in both quotations; and it’s unclear who should fulfil the aspiration. Hesse discovers the recipe from stagnation of the villadom in Lone Rangers. Kasil replaces the ideal with the figure and arithmetical increase of concrete success. Plato’s ideas were active: they materialise in the sublunar realm by themselves, or they are automatically recalled as a response to a suitable stimulant. But as soon as we depart from metaphors and start assigning aspiration to socially significant ideals to every subject, we come across a colossal problem which escalates from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. We can see whole generations without common ideals: a person is surrounded by objects and the ideas pretending to be perfect, but we do not aspire to them. A computer game can be considered as the best allegory of this condition (comprehending modernity): the virtual world may strike with perfection and provide the user with the same ideal Alter-Ego (an avatar), but at the same time we cannot say that a person aspires to this world or to this personalisation. He merely selects it. Even dependence on the virtual space cannot be considered as an aspiration in the same sense in which a bodybuilder, for example, works on making his body perfect. Predilection for a certain pastime, attachment to favourite characters may not be considered as an approximation to the ideal: a person does not change anything either in himself/herself, nor in a programmed character. A change of game status provides him/her with quantitative benefits, but nothing assimilated with anything either in a real life or in virtual life. While sorting possible options and gradations he/she does not train his/her character or himself/herself, but only follows a limited number of steps, suddenly ending up in accordance with the wish of the software creator. In fact, he does not even become

an ideal player, since there is no such model, there is just a player with the highest score of the moment.

The luxury of the developed modern world allows living without social (and sometimes, without private) ideals: without ultimate and limit values and without true aspiration to reach excellence. It is impossible to refuse the models as such, but the requirement of model excellence shifts to the area of technology. In the area of morality, the ideal is next to ultimatism and anarchy. It appears that the definiteness of ideals (and corresponding education focusing a person on aspiring to them) is closely connected with the issue of the survival of a society. A person free from existential feelings and sure of tomorrow cannot have ideals. Ideals are something excessive. A person is happy with a vague understanding of “a norm” within which his life scenario fits or not.

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