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THE “IDOLATRY” PARADIGM:
BETWEEN LITERAL MEANING AND FIGURATIVE
EXTENSION¹

Sommario

L'estensione della nozione di idolatria al di là del suo significato letterale è pratica comune attestata in svariati esempi nella storia del pensiero. Tuttavia, benché estremamente diffuso a livello pratico, tale uso figurato è stato scarsamente teorizzato da un punto di vista metodologico. Quest'articolo si propone di colmare tale lacuna, interpretando il rapporto tra i significati letterale e figurato di idolatria alla luce delle riflessioni di Giorgio Agamben sul cosiddetto “metodo paradigmatico”. La forma di idolatria deducibile dall'episodio biblico del vitello d'oro e la concezione di ideologia elaborata nella *Scuola di Francoforte* forniranno una valida coppia concettuale per testare l'efficacia di un metodo basato sul concetto di paradigma.

Parole chiave: Idolatria; Ideologia; Paradigma; Vitello d'oro; Scuola di Francoforte.

Abstract

Extending the notion of idolatry beyond its literal meaning is a common practice attested in numerous examples in the history of thought. However, though extremely widespread on a practical level, this figurative usage has scarcely been theorized from a methodological point of view.

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¹ This essay was written during my research stay at the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies at Universität Hamburg, DFG-FOR 2311.

This essay attempts to bridge this gap by interpreting the relationship between the literal and figurative meanings of idolatry through the prism of Giorgio Agamben's reflections on the so-called paradigmatic method. The form of idolatry emerging from the biblical episode of the golden calf and the conception of ideology expounded by the Frankfurt School will provide a valuable conceptual pair for testing the effectiveness of a paradigm-based method.

Keywords: Idolatry; Ideology; Paradigm; Golden Calf; Frankfurt School.

The idea of idolatry has been conceived in many ways. With substantial changes over time, it has gained a wide range of connotations, which makes "idolatry" a sort of general label for a number of distinct kinds and patterns. Without minimizing their differences, the various forms of idolatry can be divided into two broad categories: idolatry *stricto sensu* (also literal idolatry), which refers to the actual worship of alien deities and/or cult images, and idolatry *lato sensu* (or figurative idolatry), which refers to the metaphorical worship of "idols of thought" such as dogmas, prejudices, ideologies, or uncritical thinking at large. Researchers in anthropology, theology, and Jewish studies tend to focus on literal worship, while philosophers of various orientations are more concerned with metaphorical worship, but the work done to date to analyze the *link* between them is still restricted to a limited corpus of texts. More precisely: the question of *how* the two senses of idolatry relate to each other has barely been dealt with and is thus still in need of further investigation.

As a matter of fact, a broadening of perspective from *stricto* to *lato sensu* lies at the root of the reflections of several thinkers. Such classic philosophers as Francis Bacon, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Ludwig Wittgenstein could pertinently be mentioned in this context, but it would be equally appropriate to cite the names of Jewish intellectuals of the likes of Levinas, Halbertal and Margalit, Fackenheim, and others. Before going into more detail, it is thus worth noting that from many quarters, the notion of idolatry has been made fruitful even beyond the biblical framework from which it is derived, as understanding idol worship in an exclusively literal way would reduce it to an outdated phenomenon, bound to the past and irrelevant to the current reality. However, the alternative is no better: a metaphorical extension of the notion of idolatry, despite being of topical interest, would end up providing an incomplete view of the matter if its rootedness in biblical thought were not given careful consideration.

Both options are thus defective to some extent. The fact that they lead to equally one-sided perspectives suggests that it might be beneficial to deflect the research focus from each of them taken individually and to place it rather on their *relationship*. More precisely, it is necessary to investigate the conditions under which a transition from a literal to a figurative sense of “idolatry” can take place.

1. *From stricto to lato sensu*

One of the most significant attempts to include a figurative acceptance of the terms “idol” and “idolatry” in a philosophical theory is found in the thought of Francis Bacon. The “idols” he aims to eradicate from the human mind are essentially false notions and errors of reasoning which, being too deep-rooted to be called into question, are uncritically accepted and taken for granted. Thus conceived, Bacon’s idols come to be close in meaning to “prejudices” or “wrong assumptions”. Recognizing and erasing them represents the necessary *pars destruens* of a thinking path, whose complementary *pars construens* is supposed to lead humankind to truth. Here, in Bacon’s words:

There are four kinds of illusions which block men’s minds. For instruction’s sake, we have given them the following names: the first kind are called idols of the tribe; the second idols of the cave; the third idols of the marketplace; the fourth idols of the theatre. Formation of notions and axioms by means of true induction is certainly an appropriate way to banish idols and get rid of them; but it is also very useful to identify the idols.²

Not only is Bacon’s doctrine probably the first and certainly the most relevant example of the term “idol” being used figuratively, outside of a religious-theological context, to indicate mental entities, but, as the sociologist Karl Mannheim points out, it also sets a precedent for the modern understanding of “ideology”, prefiguring a conception in which society and tradition can be sources of error:

Bacon’s theory of the *idola* may be regarded to a certain extent as a forerunner of the modern conception of ideology. The “idols” were “phantoms” or “preconceptions” [...]. They may also be attributed to society or to tradition. In any case, they are obstacles in the path to true knowledge. There is

² F. BACON, *Novum Organum*, L. Jardine-M. Silverthorne eds., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000, book I, §§ 39-40.

certainly some connection between the modern term “ideology” and the term used by Bacon.³

Along the conceptual line that connects idolatry and ideology, Bacon’s legacy seems to live on in Nietzsche’s thought.⁴ The “idols” that he considers to be in the twilight of their existence and which he sets himself to destroy with the hammer of philosophical criticism are actually ideals,⁵ which have lost their meaning and are therefore about to decline. Compared to Bacon, however, Nietzsche seems to go a step further by universalizing to thought as such what Bacon restricted to some specific fallacies. For Nietzsche, it is in the very nature of human thinking to create idols and to rely on them, or, metaphors aside: thinking is inherently ideological, and the truth it aims at is not something to be discovered, but rather a product of thought, which, in turn, is a product of will, merely the result of power dynamics and human interests.⁶

Although Bacon’s and Nietzsche’s reflections, just like their affinities, are far more complex than can be rendered by this superficial description, one point at least emerges clearly from it: both philosophers think in an analogical way. Their reasoning is based on a fundamental, albeit implicit analogy according to which the human being is seen as relating to (some) ideas with the same unconditional and uncritical reverence, the same submissive attitude, that in ancient times characterized how religious worshippers related to idols.

This main point is also received and developed in the field of Jewish studies. An interpretation of idols, beyond their literal meaning, in terms of mental entities is in fact observable in numerous Jewish thinkers, but in addition to this aspect, they typically highlight another distinguishing feature of idolatry that plays a non-negligible role in a transition from *stricto*

³ K. MANNHEIM, *Ideology and Utopia. An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, Harcourt, Brace & Co., New York 1954, p. 55. The quotation is taken from the English version, which elaborates and expands on the original German version. Cf. a similar passage in Idem, *Ideologie und Utopie*, Friedrich Cohen, Bonn 1929, pp. 11-12.

⁴ Bacon’s influence on Nietzsche has been analyzed, for example, in W. Kaufmann, *The Portable Nietzsche*, Penguin, London 1976, p. 463.

⁵ In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche states this explicitly: «Idols (my word for “ideals”）」 (F. NIETZSCHE, *Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Einzelbänden*, G. Colli-M. Montinari eds., de Gruyter, Berlin-New York 1967-77, v. 6, p. 258).

⁶ Without ever using the word “ideology”, Nietzsche manages to offer one of the most in-depth analyses of ideological processes. As Terry Eagleton says: «The concept of ideology, then, is everywhere at work in Nietzsche’s writings, even if the word itself is not» (T. EAGLETON, *Ideology. An Introduction*, Verso, London-New York 1991, p. 164).

to *lato sensu*. For example, in a lecture by Emmanuel Levinas,⁷ as well as in Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit’s book *Idolatry*,⁸ the idea of a metaphorical extension of idolatry goes along with a particular emphasis on the dichotomous structure it gives rise to. In addition to metaphorically expressing (some) ideas, the employment of the notion of “idol” also always implies a boundary between two dimensions: the idolatrous and the non-idolatrous.

From a logical-argumentative point of view, recognizing a common structure in every form of idolatry is a necessary precondition for establishing a conceptual connection between the two modes of *stricto* and *lato sensu*. The fact that the same notion can be used to indicate two forms, one literal and one figurative, rests on the fact that they share the same structure, which in this case is a dichotomous one. It is, in other words, by virtue of this common trait that literal and figurative idolatry can be seen as different inflections of the same notion instead of two completely different notions.

In this regard, Levinas starts his Talmud lecture *Mépris de la Thora comme idolâtrie* by drawing a distinction between «cults properly so called» and «hidden, unconscious cults without hieratic rites: as ideologies, fads, mad passions».⁹ With just a change of wording, then, the conceptual pair of *stricto sensu*/*lato sensu* – or literal/figurative – seems also to inform Levinas’s observations. But beyond this double acceptance of the term, a dichotomous structure is further introduced as an essential feature of *any* form of idolatry. In this view, then, reasoning about idolatry requires reasoning about a pair of antonyms, which, in Levinas’s lecture, are Torah and contempt for the Torah, as he declares:

I would like to discuss, under the topic of idolatry, the antithesis of idolatry. [...].

I would like to speak of the Torah itself, the book of anti-idolatry, the absolute opposite of idolatry! [...].

⁷ Anti-idolatry can be considered the leitmotif that, implicitly or explicitly, runs through Levinas’s entire work. See, for example, R. DI CASTRO, *Il divieto di idolatria tra monoteismo e iconoclastia. Una lettura attraverso Emmanuel Levinas*, Guerini e Associati, Milano 2012. In this essay, however, the focus is on his Talmudic lectures.

⁸ No doubt there are other authors and other works from the field of Jewish thought that could be mentioned here, but Levinas, Halbertal, and Margalit seem to have particular exemplary appeal.

⁹ E. LEVINAS, «Leçon talmudique: Mépris de la Thora comme idolâtrie» in *Idoles. Données et débats*, J. HALPERIN-G. LEVITTE eds., Denoël, Paris 1985, pp. 201-217, here p. 201.

Thus, I would like to speak of the second term of an alternative that humanity has faced since Sinai: idolatry or religion.¹⁰

What Levinas implies is essentially a two-pole structure governed by a two-value logic, according to which the slightest move away from one pole is immediately equated to a move toward its opposite. If the Torah is anti-idolatry *par excellence*, as it is, then any form of contempt for it is *eo ipso* a fall into idolatry, and the entire lecture consists in exploring the different ways in which the Torah can be scorned. Each of them is the result of a double negation: contempt for the Torah is a rejection of anti-idolatry, and therefore an affirmation of idolatry. An exhaustive reconstruction of Levinas's meticulous analysis would be beyond the scope of this essay, but it is at least worth noting that his Talmud lecture has the merit of recognizing and emphasizing the antagonistic nature of idolatry, whose definition depends heavily on what it opposes.

From an initial consideration of idolatry as a single concept, then, the inquiry's scope needs to be enlarged to include both the conceptual pair of idolatry/anti-idolatry and above all, the antithetical relation that connects the two terms. Thus, a theoretical structure emerges that consists of two poles and the opposition from which they derive their meanings. But while each pole can change, as historical context and religious sensibility change, the antithesis between them remains constant, equally radical in every variation. The history and theory of idolatry can thus be more precisely redefined as the history and theory of a series of dichotomies.

Halbertal and Margalit, for example, get this point right when they talk – alas very briefly – about a *conceptual codependency* and declare that their aim is «to outline the different modern extensions that arise from the *powerful* yet *fluid* opposition between idolatry and nonidolatry».¹¹ Particular attention should be paid to the adjectives chosen for defining the opposition, which is said to be “powerful”, meaning radical, sharp, and uncompromising, but also “fluid”, as the poles of idolatry and anti-idolatry (“nonidolatry” in Halbertal and Margalit's terms) can adapt to different contexts and take on different forms while still remaining at odds with each other.

By way of partial conclusion, it is worth noting that Bacon's *eidola*, Nietzsche's *Götzen*, and Levinas's *cultes clandestines et inconscients* are all meaningful examples of “idolatry” used in a metaphorical way – that is, examples of idolatry *lato sensu*. It is, however, remarkable that the central issue of

¹⁰ Ibidem, pp. 201-202.

¹¹ M. HALBERTAL-A. MARGALIT, *Idolatry*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 1992, p. 241, my emphasis.

how this metaphorical translation is possible is mostly left unaddressed. The fact that “idolatry” and cognates are used for phenomena that are very different from the actual worship of material idols *suggests* that the figurative meaning of the term shares at least some essential traits with the literal one. But this is exactly the problem: in most cases, the connection between *stricto* and *lato sensu* is no more than suggested, barely evoked, with most thinkers assuming its validity without feeling the need to justify it.

2. Emil Fackenheim’s View

A notable exception to the general trend described above, however, can be found in a 1973 essay by Emil Fackenheim. In his article *Idolatry as a Modern Possibility*,¹² Fackenheim works with the categories of *ancient* or *literal* idolatry on the one hand and *modern* or *metaphorical* idolatry on the other. This passage provides a valid introduction to the problem:

No one detects a resurgence of ancient idolatry. Yet something obscurely related seems to survive in the modern world, [...]. Thus a metaphorical use of “idol”, “worship”, “false god” has forced itself into the language of serious thinkers, both religious and secularist; [...]. Somehow idolatry survives. Yet, what is modern idolatry? It is not, in the first place, actual worship [...]. In the second place, it is somehow related to ancient idolatry.¹³

Two main points emerge from the text: firstly, it says what modern idolatry is not, and secondly, it indicates what modern idolatry is related to. Simply put, modern or metaphorical idolatry is not ancient or literal idolatry, but at the same time, they are somehow related. They are different, of course, but not different enough to require two distinct notions in order to be properly addressed. They are two aspects, two forms of the same concept, rather than completely different concepts.

A change in form is then explicitly called for when Fackenheim’s argumentation takes on a prescriptive character, asserting that the notion of new, demythologized idolatry:

must satisfy three conditions: it must allow that the old idols are now dead; it must allow that they once had a terrifying power; and it must make possible

¹² E. FACKENHEIM, «Idolatry as a Modern Possibility» in *Encounters between Judaism and Modern Philosophy*, Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia 1973, pp. 173-198.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 175.

the assertion that this power has now not simply vanished but rather passed into something else.¹⁴

In other words, the power of old idolatry has taken on a new form. But however different this may be compared to the old one, they will always share at least a common denominator, which Fackenheim recognizes in a general tendency typical of idolatrous dynamics, regardless of the specific context in which they take place. Essentially, both ancient and modern – literal and figurative – idolatry consist in merging, in erroneously conflating two dimensions that should be kept separate; to wit, the finite and the infinite. In this view, then, what constitutes idolatry – be it literal or figurative – is, broadly speaking, *the failure to acknowledge the irreducible gap that exists between the finite and the infinite*.

This general principle is first observed in relation to *ancient* idolatry:

The ancient idol is not a finite object that distinguishes itself from the divine Infinity even as it points to it. The idol is itself divine. The idolatrous projection of infinite feeling upon the finite object is such as to produce not a symbolic but rather a *literal* and hence *total* identification of finiteness and infinitude.¹⁵

Needless to say, this erroneous identification, being the very source of the idolatrous sin, must be condemned. But in addition, drawing a parallel between *ancient* and *modern* idolatry, Fackenheim goes on to affirm that

[...] we shall use the criterion that we established in the exposition of ancient idolatry as we make an attempt to identify its modern heir and successor: idolatry is the *literal* identification of finiteness and infinitude.¹⁶

However different they may be, ancient and modern manifestations of idolatry turn out to be characterized by the same *idolatrous core*, which consists in disregarding the finite-infinite divide. In other words, the decisive factor in the matter of idolatry is *the manner in which one approaches the gap*: ignoring it leads to idolatrous consequences, while on the other hand, Fackenheim concludes, “[I]here is [...] no idolatry where this gap exists and is known to exist”.¹⁷

Fackenheim’s article certainly makes an important contribution to the study of old and new forms of idolatry, developing his argumentation on

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 184.

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 189.

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 188.

two levels and addressing the connections between literal and figurative meanings. However, although his work indubitably has the merit of raising the central questions, it still maintains a certain vagueness when it comes to answering them. In this regard, even Fackenheim’s word choice speaks volumes: for example, the text mentions more than once that modern idolatry is “somehow” “obscurely” related to ancient idolatry, without the nature of this relation being specified. Against such obscurity, this essay will attempt to bring some clarity to the problem, not least on a methodological level.

3. *The Paradigmatic Method*

Obviously, the relationship between *stricto* and *lato sensu* at issue here is analogical in nature. However, unfortunately, analogy is one of those things where the gap between praxis and theory is particularly wide: while analogy is frequently used on a practical level, it is rarely conceptualized in a theory. It is only recently that a methodological structure based on analogy has been developed, thus providing a viable way to approach the study of the two forms of idolatry. This structure is the so-called paradigmatic method as expounded by the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben in his book *Signatura Rerum. Sul Metodo*.¹⁸

By “paradigm”, Agamben means an «actual historical phenomenon»¹⁹ and at the same time, a «generalizable model of functioning».²⁰ More precisely, a paradigm is a particular phenomenon in which a model of functioning, a mechanism, is recognized and generalized beyond its original context to then be applied to other contexts and used as a key to the reading of other phenomena. By way of generalization, the paradigm «constitutes and makes intelligible»²¹ a broader set of phenomena, which Agamben calls «paradigmatic group».²² The phenomena included in the paradigmatic group are obviously different from one another and from the paradigm itself. They have different contents, belong to different contexts, and even come from different epochs. However, there is one thing they share with one another and with the paradigm; to wit, their way of functioning, their internal mechanisms.

¹⁸ G. AGAMBEN, *Signatura Rerum. Sul Metodo*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2008.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 11.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 18.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 11.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 33.

In this view, the paradigmatic method can be broken down into four phases. It consists of:

- a. selecting a suitable phenomenon, which is going to be used as a paradigm;
- b. analyzing it in order to detect its essential elements and internal dynamics;
- c. generalizing them;
- d. using them to interpret other phenomena, which are different from the paradigm but connected to it by way of analogy.

In short: *selection, analysis, generalization, and interpretation.*

The idea lying at the root of this essay is to use the phenomenon of idolatry as a paradigm; more precisely, the kind of idolatry chosen as a paradigm is that called idolatry *stricto sensu* or literal idolatry. By analyzing its essential features as they emerge from its original contexts, a generalization becomes possible, resulting in the creation of a paradigmatic group. The various phenomena included in it can all be considered cases of what has been called idolatry *lato sensu* or figurative idolatry. In other words, a paradigmatic group, thus conceived, includes those phenomena that, although not literally idolatrous, function in the same way as literal idolatry and are therefore interpretable through the lens of its dynamics.

The relation between *stricto* and *lato sensu* is thus a paradigmatic one. However, in order to avoid the same misunderstandings Agamben himself has to deal with,²³ it is worth stressing once again that paradigmatic relations are analogical rather than historical or philological. This means that paradigmatic analyses are less focused on such notions as “derivation” or “influence” than they are on structural and conceptual correspondences between different positions.

4. *Idolatry stricto sensu: The Golden Calf*

By considering the phenomenon of idolatry as a paradigm, it is possible to deduce its constitutive features from one of the most famous examples, perhaps *the* most famous example, in the Torah; that is, the story of the golden calf. The essential elements and dynamics emerging from this biblical episode can then be generalized and used to generate a paradigmatic field, in which various cases of idolatry *lato sensu* can be included and explained through this inclusion. One case of idolatry *lato sensu* is especially worthy of consideration on account of the great impact it has on

²³ See *ibidem*, p. 11.

contemporary culture; namely, the notion of “ideology” as it emerges from the works of Fromm, Horkheimer, and Adorno.

The episode of the golden calf, as a starting point for this argument, is narrated in *Exodus* 32: 3-4. Here is the text:

And all the people took off the gold rings that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron.

This he took from them and cast in a mold, and made it into a molten calf. And they exclaimed, “This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!”²⁴

The last sentence is particularly significant for understanding the nature of this idolatrous act: it is a clear indication that the golden calf is not meant for the worship of another deity, for example, one of the so-called *elohim acherim* (stranger deities). Rather, the intended deity is – so to speak – the *right* God, the one who freed the Israelites from Egypt. This simple remark shows that the sin connected to the episode of the golden calf does not consist in worshipping a wrong god, but in representing the right God in the wrong way. Dealing with this topic, the German Egyptologist Jan Assmann points out that «they [the Israelites] did not want to turn away from their god. The charge, then, is not apostasy, but a mistake in choosing the means of communication».²⁵

Assmann’s conclusion can best be appreciated if one considers that at least two models of idolatry emerge from the Torah. The first consists in worshipping the wrong gods, while the second consists in worshipping the right God in the wrong way – for example, by means of a cult image like the golden calf. In this latter case, then, the idolatrous factor is not to be found in the *object* of worship, but rather in the *medium* through which the worship is performed. Moreover, it should be noted that highlighting the role of the medium in the sin of idolatry cannot be considered a recent trend. On the contrary, it has a long history in a long line of thinkers, ranging from Judah Halevi, Nachmanides, and Or Hachayim to twentieth-century scholars such as Erich Fromm, Pier Cesare Bori, Stéphane Mosès, and obviously Assmann himself.²⁶

²⁴ *Exodus* 32: 3-4.

²⁵ J. ASSMANN, «Du sollst dir keine Bilder machen. Bedeutung und Kontext des Zweiten Gebots» in *Bilder-Verbot und Verlangen in Kunst und Musik*, C. SCHEIB-S. SANIO eds., PFAU, Saarbrücken 2000, pp. 13-26, here p. 17.

²⁶ See J. HALEVI, *Kitab al Khaṣṣari*, trans. H. Hirschfeld, Routledge, London 1905; NACHMANIDES, *Commentary on the Torah by Ramban (Nachmanides)*, Shilo, New York 1971-1976; OR HACHAYIM, *Commentary on the Torah*, Urim, Jerusalem 1998; E. FROMM, *You Shall Be as Gods. A Radical Interpretation of the Old Testament and Its Tradition*,

In this context, Stéphane Mosès's essay *Le pointe d'Énoch. L'art et l'idole selon les sources juives* can be a particularly telling example, providing a reading of the golden calf episode that hinges on an anthropological conception of the human being as a "symbolizing being" (*être symbolisant*). The essay starts by delineating the role of the biblical Moses as that of a mediator between God's word and the Jewish people. The conditions for idolatry emerge when Moses is late returning from Mount Sinai and the Israelites start to feel the anguish of having lost their mediator with God.²⁷ Without it, Mosès says, «their experience is devoid of any sense [and] reminds one of the experience of nothingness»,²⁸ adding that in general, «a human being cannot live and think without resorting to symbols; if they are missing, it is as though she has died».²⁹

The human need for a mediating symbol, combined with the worrying absence of Moses, urges the Israelites to look for a new method of mediation, which they believe they can find by regressing to the symbolic forms found in Egyptian culture. In this view, then, the creation of the golden calf is essentially an attempt to replace Moses in his function as a mediator. But this attempt is awkward and unsuccessful, as a statue, a three-dimensional visual representation, turns out to be particularly exposed to the so-called risk of substitution; that is, the risk that the mediating element, i.e., the symbol, will be confused with the reality it is supposed to refer to. Of course, such a risk is common and inherent in the symbolic praxis as such, so much so that as Stéphane Mosès says, «symbolizing means to be exposed to the danger of taking the sign for the sense».³⁰ However, of all signs or symbols,³¹ the visual ones (pictures and statues) provide the most fertile ground for erroneous substitutions: Mosès concludes that «more than words, pictures and statues lend themselves to mimetic

Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York-Chicago-San Francisco 1966; P. C. BORI, *Il vitello d'oro. Le radici della controversia anti giudaica*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 1983; S. MOSÈS, «Le pointe d'Énoch. L'art et l'idole selon les sources juives» in *Idoles. Données et débats*, J. HALPERIN-G. LÉVITTE eds., Denoël, Paris 1985, pp. 133-144.

²⁷ «When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, the people gathered against Aaron and said to him, "Come, make us a god who shall go before us, for that fellow Moses – the man who brought us from the land of Egypt – we do not know what has happened to him"» (*Exodus* 32: 1).

²⁸ S. MOSÈS, op. cit., p. 135.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 138.

³¹ Stéphane Mosès seems to use the two terms synonymously.

misunderstandings»,³² thus giving an answer as to why representing God through an image is condemned as idolatrous and consequently prohibited.

When Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit deal with the same problem, they formulate the question in terms of a contrast between linguistic and visual representation. They ask, more precisely, why representations in pictures and statues are forbidden while linguistic representations are permitted.³³ According to the two authors, this difference is explainable through different degrees of the “risk of substitution”. Visual representation, unlike linguistic representation, implies the danger that the picture will take God’s place in the eyes of the worshiper, while words do not seem to pose a similar threat. For example, nobody would ever think that the three-letter sequence “G-o-d” is God, but the idea of a material, visible object having a divine nature certainly appeared to be more plausible and was in fact very common in the ancient Middle East. It is thus clear why, in this view, the creation of the golden calf was punished as a grave sin, even if the Israelites turned out to be considering the statue as a reference to the God who had freed them from slavery and not an idol to some foreign deity.

Taking this biblical episode as a paradigm for idolatry, or at least for one of the many forms of idolatry, requires that the following steps consist in analyzing it and identifying its essential elements and processes. These will then constitute what Agamben calls “a generalizable model of functioning”, by means of which other phenomena can be explained. As a result of this analysis, it can be concluded that the conception of idolatry emerging from the story of the golden calf is based on *two elements* and *one process*. The elements are obviously God, i.e., the intended deity, and the calf statue, while the process is the possible, and dreaded, substitution of the former with the latter. A further generalization allows reasoning in even more abstract terms: two separate elements or dimensions are at issue, whose conflation would be idolatrous.

Finally, this general model of functioning, drawn from a case of idolatry *stricto sensu*, can be applied and used to explain various cases of idolatry *lato sensu* that function in the same way and follow the same pattern. One of them – in fact, one of the most relevant and influential – is the conception of “ideology” developed in the cultural environment of the Frankfurt School.

³² S. MOSES, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

³³ See M. HALBERTAL-A. MARGALIT, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

5. *Idolatry lato sensu I: Fromm's View on Ideology*

In his work *You Shall Be as Gods*, Erich Fromm provides an extremely clear description of ideology. The premise of his argument is the plain observation that concepts relate to reality in order to express it. However,

[...] if the concept becomes alienated – that is, separated from the experience to which it refers – it loses its reality and is transformed into an artifact of man's mind. [...]. Once this happens – and this process of the alienation of concepts is the rule rather than the exception – the idea expressing an experience has been transformed into an ideology that usurps the place of the underlying reality.

[...] A concept can never adequately express the experience it refers to. It *points* to it, but it *is* not it.³⁴

The concept always only refers to reality, without being it. Concepts are imperfect representations of reality. But sometimes – actually, more often than not, according to Fromm – a process of alienation makes the concept lose contact with the reality it is supposed to account for. And alienation, in turn, leads to ideology – that is, essentially, substitution: the artificial, human-made concept usurps the place of the underlying reality. It is at this juncture that the analogy between idolatry and ideology comes in and becomes evident. In fact, their relationship can even be schematized through a proportion, like in basic arithmetic. By comparing the story of the golden calf and Fromm's reflections, the following formula can be obtained: "Picture : God = Concept : Reality".

A picture can only relate to God in the same *imperfect* way that a concept can relate to reality. But if this imperfection is not properly recognized, then the picture may be erroneously substituted for God, just as reality can be erroneously replaced with the corresponding concept. The first error is then conducive to idolatry, while the second can be a source of ideology. The point is that both relationships are based on *reference* and as such, they always imply a gap, whose recognition, however, cannot be taken for granted. Failing to acknowledge it leads to an illicit substitution, which can be called "idolatrous" or "ideological", depending on the context.

Obviously, the two sides of the proportion have different contents: God is not the same as reality and a picture is not a concept. However, the relationships between them are governed by the same dynamics; that is, they follow the same "model of functioning" – in Agamben's terminology – and are thus exposed to the same "risk of substitution". This allows for

³⁴ E. FROMM, op. cit., pp. 18-19.

the conclusion that from this point of view, idolatry can be considered a paradigm for ideology; or in other words, ideology is *lato sensu* what idolatry is *stricto sensu*; or in still other words, the *ideological* dynamics described by Fromm can be illustrated and explained through the *idolatrous* dynamics inferred from the Torah.

6. Idolatry *lato sensu* II: Horkheimer and Adorno’s View on Ideology

In the same cultural environment as Fromm, i.e., the Frankfurt School, the most in-depth reflections on idolatry and ideology are probably to be found in the writings of Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno: *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, which they wrote together, and *Negative Dialektik*, which was written by Adorno alone.³⁵ In this regard, one of the most frequently quoted passages from *Dialektik der Aufklärung* reads:

The Jewish religion [...] places all hope in the prohibition on invoking falsity as God, the finite as the infinite, the lie as truth. The pledge of salvation lies in the rejection of any faith that claims to depict it, knowledge in the denunciation of illusion. [...]. The right of the image is rescued in the faithful observance of its prohibition. [...] Dialectic discloses each image as script. It teaches us to read from its features the admission of falseness which cancels its power and hands it over to truth.³⁶

The four terms that appear in the ratio above can be read between the lines and recognized in the view emerging from this complex – perhaps even paradoxical – quotation. The antithesis it presents between the finite and the infinite, between lie and truth, resonates with and is equated to the opposition that separates the absolute infinity of God from the imperfection of His representations. But for the suggested analogy between Jewish law and dialectical thinking to hold, a theoretical translation is implicitly required, by virtue of which the dynamics informing a scriptural rule like the prohibition of images are disengaged from their religious context and projected onto the secular reality.³⁷ Any image claiming to represent God

³⁵ See M. HORKHEIMER-T. W. ADORNO, *Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente*, Querido, Amsterdam 1947 and T. W. ADORNO, *Negative Dialektik*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1966.

³⁶ M. HORKHEIMER-T. W. ADORNO, op. cit., pp. 40-41.

³⁷ The same translation is discussed, for example, by Hans Belting in an essay significantly titled *Idolatrie Heute*, in which it is written that «the real plays now the role that once was played by God» (H. BELTING, «Idolatrie Heute» in *Der zweite Blick. Bildgeschichte und Bildreflexion*, H. BELTING-D. KAMPER eds., Fink, München 2000, pp. 273-280, here p. 274.

cannot but be irremediably false, say Horkheimer and Adorno, just as any concept claiming to express truth is inevitably inadequate.

In addition, this correlation reveals that the very conception of truth needs to be redefined in a purely negative way. It is impossible to say what reality is. Any attempt to depict it is doomed to failure and truth turns out to consist in nothing more – and nothing other – than the rejection of false representations or, more generally, the denunciation of untruth, the exhibition of the signs of falseness that characterize every image. Here, however, is where Horkheimer and Adorno seem to go a step further than the Jewish conception to which they refer. While *Exodus* (32: 20) narrates that Moses destroys (burns) the golden calf, Horkheimer and Adorno contemplate the possibility of rescuing “the right of the image” by weakening or rejecting its claim to truth.

If truth can only exist indirectly, in the form of a negation of untruth, then this negative meaning can emerge only from the image itself, through a dialectical disclosure of its defectiveness and imperfection. The process can be roughly compared to the exposure of a lie. A series of dialectical steps brings to light the contradictions that are necessarily implied by any image and results in a sort of unmasking – pretty much like a lie that is finally revealed as such. But at this juncture, the conclusion can be drawn that a lie that is forced to admit to its falseness is arguably not a lie anymore, as it is no longer deceptive and/or harmful.

The use of the meaning of a biblical law as a key to the reading of the truth/untruth relationship can be considered a *secularization* of the Jewish image ban. But while this process is still implicit in *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, it becomes explicit in Adorno’s *Negative Dialektik*, which in many aspects continues and radicalizes the view he shared with Horkheimer in their previous work. In Adorno’s complex discussion, an argumentative path can be outlined by connecting four main concepts that have a major impact on the philosophical discourse on idolatry. These are “identifying thought” (*identifizierendes Denken*), “the non-identical” (*das Nichtidentische*), “contradiction” (*Widerspruch*), and “matter” (*Materie*).

Contrary to what some may believe at first glance, identifying thought is not a particular type of thought, as it rather indicates thinking as such. For Adorno, it is human rationality, *ratio* itself, to be essentially based on and aimed at identification as its main way to relate to reality. In fact, in Adornoian terminology, “identification” means the tendency of human thought to draw conceptual boundaries around a portion of reality so as to fasten its identity by way of definition, determination, and separation from other portions. In addition, further analysis of such a tendency would also show how Adorno recognizes that identification dynamics are rooted

in an inborn *need for determinateness* coupled with an equally inborn *fear of indeterminateness*.³⁸

In this regard, a passage from the book’s *Einleitung* states unequivocally that «to think is to identify. [...] Appearance (*Schein*) and truth (*Wahrheit*) of thought entwine»;³⁹ while in another passage, this time from a central chapter, Adorno adds that «identity is the primal form of ideology».⁴⁰ It is thus easy to see how the combination of these two affirmations results in a view characterized by the same pattern illustrated in the previous sections of this essay. On the one hand, if thinking is based on identification and this in turn is a form of ideology, it is only logical to conclude that thinking is inherently ideological. On the other, the entwinement of appearance and truth, which Adorno presents as an adverse effect of identification, is nothing other than an erroneous conflation of two different dimensions: the *ideological* fusion of reality and its conceptual image.

Identifying thought – or ideology, which can be considered the same thing at this juncture – generates an artificial structure to be superimposed onto the portion of reality to which it relates. The indeterminateness of reality is thus covered and dominated through the filter of a fake determination existing only in thought. As a matter of fact, however, such a forced determinateness is unable to completely repress indeterminateness, which manages to find its way through the rigid framework of identity logic. And more precisely, the specific way in which indeterminateness manifests itself *against* the yoke of identifying thought is *contradiction*. The truth of reality lying beneath the structures of thought – for which Adorno coins the expression “the non-identical” – indirectly emerges from the inevitable contradictions of identity: «whatever will not fit this principle [i.e., the principle of identity] comes to be designated as a contradiction. Contradiction is nonidentity under the aspect of identity».⁴¹

From a terminological point of view, however, Adorno is well aware that the phrase “the non-identical”, just like any notion obtained by way of negation, always remains connected to what it negates. In order to free non-identity from the coordinates of identity in which it is still embroiled,

³⁸ It cannot go unnoticed that both the “need for determinateness” and the “fear of indeterminateness” are particularly relevant in Nietzsche’s thought. Even though an exhaustive investigation into the relationship between Nietzsche and Adorno would require a dedicated essay, their affinities should at least be mentioned here.

³⁹ T. W. ADORNO, op. cit., p. 15.

⁴⁰ Ibidem, p. 149.

⁴¹ Ibidem, p. 15. In other words: The untruth of identity – that is, its contradiction – is the truth of non-identity.

Adorno introduces the notion of “matter”. It is worth citing the entire passage:

Viewed from outside, that which in reflecting upon the mind appears specifically as not mental, as an object, is material. The category of non-identity still obeys the measure of identity. Emancipated from that measure, the non-identical moments show up as matter, or as inseparably fused with material things.⁴²

The non-identical, which appears as a *contradiction* from the point of view of identifying thought, appears as *matter* if considered from another point of view that is unfettered by the dictates of identity logic.

It is in the context of this conceptual network – the relationship between identity and non-identity, as well as their connections to the notions of contradiction and matter – that Adorno touches on the Jewish prohibition of images. The non-identical character of matter makes this refractory to any attempt to represent it, as the very act of representing, in this case, would mean applying the logic of identity to what is essentially alien to it. Representation cannot lead to a thorough understanding of the represented, but rather results in a distorted image of it. As Adorno says:

It is only in the absence of images that the full object could be conceived. Such absence concurs with the theological ban on images. Materialism brought that ban into secular form [...]. At its most materialistic, materialism comes to agree with theology.⁴³

However, in this convergence of theology and materialism, a paradigmatic bond between idolatry and ideology comes to the fore. The ideological attitude of identifying thought in its approach to reality is seen as corresponding to the idolatrous purpose of representing God in an image. This implies that the inevitable failure to produce such an image is, *mutatis mutandis*, the same failure identification encounters when it attempts to dominate reality by locking it up in a determined concept. Ideology is thus secularized idolatry, in Adorno’s view, at least as much as the anti-ideological disposition of materialism is a secularized form of theological anti-idolatry. But in the last analysis, these seem to be merely different ways of saying the same thing; that is, that idolatry is a paradigm for ideology.

⁴² Ibidem, p. 191.

⁴³ Ibidem, p. 205.

7. Conclusion

Between literal meaning and figurative extension, the thinkers of the Frankfurt School use the notion of idolatry in a paradigmatic way, presenting it as analogous to ideology. Of course, from a strictly philological point of view, it must be recognized that they never mention the word “paradigm”. However, the remarks in this essay are made on a conceptual rather than terminological level. That means that they are less concerned with whether the term “paradigm” is actually mentioned in a text than with whether a philosophical conception can be explained within the framework of a paradigmatic method. The conclusion is that idolatry, along with its prohibition, can be viewed as the literal side of a paradigmatic relationship, while ideology and the critique thereof represent its figurative side.

Finally, it is worth recalling that the first argumentative step in this essay consisted in choosing the episode of the golden calf as a paradigm. The verb “to choose” is indeed more accurate than it may seem at first glance, as it captures an important aspect of the paradigmatic method: it is based on an initial choice. The paradigm is always a choice, and the sense it can lead to is not discovered, but generated through analogical connections. More concretely, this means that as idolatry comes in different forms, other conceptions of idolatry could be chosen as paradigms and generate different paradigmatic fields, in which other phenomena can be included and explained. In other words: what has been discussed thus far is just a small part, a fraction, of idolatry’s paradigmatic potential. Further research in this direction is thus a desideratum for such potential to be fully unlocked.

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