

Gordana Đerić

Institute for philosophy and social theory
Belgrade

Development of stereotypes – multidisciplinary approach

(anthropological, socio-psychological, literary–historical and imagological perspective)

Summary

This paper offers a brief insight into the questions of genesis, role and significance of the stereotype within the identity studies and discourses related to construction of 'Otherness'. The author explores semiotic dimensions of stereotypes through time, as well as their practical value in public discourses, especially since the time of the Enlightenment turn; the author embarks on this exploration by anchoring her understanding of stereotype outside the narrowbordered 'rhetorical correctness' and by joining together several disciplinary perspectives (from anthropology, social psychology, literary history and imagology). Therefore, the main focus of this paper is on the interrelation of two features immanent to the socially contextualized phenomenon of stereotype: on one hand, its durability and stability, and on the other, its ability to change own discursive clothing, that is, replacement of the used, uncorrect stereotypes with the new ones.

Key words: Otherness, stereotype, 'images of mind', durability within the change, social contextualization.

Abstract:

Symbolic ideas about 'Otherness' have existed in the world for almost as long as the world itself and the orientation in it. If we research on the ideas from the pre–historical era it can be read that people from the north of Europe had been perceived as “impulsive” and “warm” as opposed to “cold” southerners. A tendency to draw mental lines particularly characterized the antiquity, when the pronounced philosophers had written about the characteristics of those communities they belonged to alongside of the description of the “character of the foreigners”. However, the possibility to create,

sustain or to change an idea has always belonged to those that possessed the maximum of political, military, economic and symbolic power. Therefore as we know, the territories outside of the Roman Empire had been seen as inhabited by the barbarians. Today these ideas are not valid anymore, they are even reversed.

The period of the Enlightenment was crucial for the changes in philosophy and literature. The basic change was the symbolic division into “West” and “East” the “civilized” and the “barbarians” and in the period of the romanticism the ideas about the specific character of a nation, or national spirit started to appear. The increased interest for these issues resulted in founding a new science, ethno–psychology (1851), as a consequence of the popularity of some work from the previous century : *The Spirit of the Laws* by Montesquieu where it is said that ‘people are not the same everywhere’ and J. G. Herder, who said that creativity and power lie in the primitive. The adventurous novels become quite popular.

The researches about “the character and mentality of a nation” at the beginning of the 20th century followed the political need to get to know your 'Enemy'. Some of the most famous anthropological researches had been inspired by these reasons exactly. Another need was to research why men need to generalize and classify. These interest are where the research of stereotypes originate from. However, this twist from “ethnic character” into “ethnic stereotype” was mostly the consequence of the catastrophes of the Second World War

Various disciplines attempted to make relative or at least question these ideas. For all of them the stereotype became a concept that had to be used to explain social change and human adaptability to it. And the question what the stereotype is hard to be answered. Earlier, it almost seems that the consensus existed about “good” and “bad” stereotypes. Today, rarely anyone serious will use such politically useful attributes such as “civilized” as “barbarian”, it is correct to talk about “otherness” alone.

The stereotype is relatively new and instable concept. It slowly loses its significance. It shared the destiny of all the fashionable concepts, the more experience it was covering, the more it lost in its precision and clarity. All until the 1970s, the meanings attached to it

were strictly negative. Most of researchers agreed it meant the simplified depiction of phenomena, groups and collectives.

This concept, however, does not have only a negative character. It is an important cognitive function, that cannot be separated from communicativity. It is the already established model of generalization, which is hard to be changed. To simplify it, it is an efficient means, but not only a means, to insult (or praise) someone based on person's racial, ethnic, gender, professional, physical or any other characteristics. Being a neutral concept, it is one of the basic means to form attitudes, to assure "cultural superiority", cultural imperialism as the extension of that economic imperialism.

Regardless of these academic considerations, the public in general, and the media in particular follow the changes imposed by politics, and keep enforcing politically (or socially) correct stereotypes. Although the changes of ideology have been changing the "correctness" of certain stereotypes, ideological or political stereotypes as well as various bureaucratic formalisms pass without being noticed and drawing the analytical attention. Even among the researchers some stereotypes are accepted as undisputed and even necessary, and others are being censored. More and more attention is being paid to the rhetorical correctness, but it is not certain that this new rhetoric influences the change of the established ideas. Does naming of "blacks" to "African Americans", "Balkan" to "South-Eastern Europe", "Gypsies" into "Roma" change the status of these groups and regions, or does it even stress the existence of prejudices?

In the history of the study of stereotypes, cultural and ethnic stereotypes have been the most researched on. The fact that they are persisting also contains the possibility of the manipulation and the escalation in the times of crisis. Stereotypes are actually for communications and their practical usage is not unknown anymore. 'Images in heads' relate to the non-verbal ideas and actions as well, therefore it is wrong to believe that those ideas that are not publicly expressed do not exist; on the contrary.

The wider view of this phenomenon leads us to differentiate within the concept itself into *linguistic stereotypes*, and *stereotypes in action* (non-verbal, the expected ways to react). Parallel to this, we could differentiate *silent* and *outspoken* stereotypes. Since they do not

exist solely at the rhetorical level, this phenomenon has developed into a special kind of discourse.

In the most reduced versions, stereotypes are being recognized as the words that cover it all: they have universal classifying functions. They can hide numerous differences, but they are undoubtedly useful to justify political/ideological aims.

That is why the life span of a stereotype is crucially connected to the social situation. The very naming of things as left/right, communism, fascism, Islam: Christianity, East: West) can be understood as shortcut, or a stereotype. If we suppose the certainty of the process of the “de–stereotyping”, it is hard to achieve it by inverting or just by a mere negation. It is irrelevant to the analyses whether the stereotypes are false or not, the issue is what, when and why it is achieved by using it. To negate or to change by introducing the anti–stereotype can be understood as a reaction to long–lasting stereotypes, therefore it is an action that leads to its additional confirmation