

Rise and Fall of Ideas and Ideology

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Last week several participants argued about "life cycles" of systems of ideas/ideologies. A short while ago I was fumbling around with the new CD-ROM versions of several citation indexes, which provided me with the following (rather unintelligent and misused) data on who has been quoted how often in the scholarly journals. The following figures, extracted from the "Arts and Humanities Citation Index", might nonetheless be helpful in assessing life cycles of ideas, methodologies, and of some people's minds:

*

AUTHOR CITED in 1980-89 in 1990 in 1991 in 1992 in 1993 in 1994
(*annual average)

GADAMER-H* 162 189 191 187 152 155

MARX-K* 634 395 321 315 319 272

ENGELS-F* 208 117 72 77 55 64

WEBER-M* 203 194 218 248 256 246

HABERMAS-J* 230 297 320 360 344 362

GEERTZ-C* 137 190 187 223 217 216

FOUCAULT-M* 391 524 584 669 722 735

DERRIDA-J* 352 530 521 505 481 513

GINGRICH-N* 0 0 0 0 0 0

(* Note: In order to make good for the differences in the total number of counted quotations in the several annual databases - and so to make the figures comparable to each other - I have multiplied the raw data as follows: The figures of 1980-89 were multiplied by 0.1, those for 1990 by 1.07, those of 1991 by 0.87, those of 1992 by 0.82, those for 1993 by 0.92, and those of 1994 by 0.97. Statistical information can be found in the printed versions of the A&HCI).

I have attempted to include representatives of several schools of thought, such as Rankeans, Marxists, structuralists, post-structuralists, postmodernists, and neo-conservatives. One might, no doubt, argue about the samples to be found in my short-list; it was compiled under time-pressure and has certainly got a somewhat German bias (and, as I now recognize, fails to include any women). Nonetheless one might detect in it a general decline of the Marxist paradigm on the one hand, and a rise in postmodern methodologies on the other hand.

However, this should not to be regarded as a ranking-list, I think - these statistics simply illustrate the finding that certain trains of thought and ideologies gain prominence (in the merely quantitative point of view) at times - and lose it again sooner or later; they cannot account neither for their respective qualitative values nor for their degrees of "truth", whatever all that might be. Here it is exactly at stake, how "quality" in research and "truth" ought to be assessed. At the turn of the century, for instance, Max Nordau, the popularizer of the term "degeneration", was a highly successful and frequently cited author - so what did it mean then, and what does this/he mean to us? - In addition, the citation index does not distinguish between positive and negative citations; so it might well be that most of the journal articles citing Foucault might be doing so in order to actually criticize his ideas. Nonetheless his ideas seem to be so influential at the moment, that scholars have to quote him so often nowadays.

For all those scholars who now fear a "Decline of the West": Aristotle was quoted no less than 692 times in scholarly journals in 1994 - so there is certainly not a 5-year-life cycle for all people's minds!

A further idea might be to establish citation-ranking lists for particular fields of studies - scientists are said to do so, whenever a new Nobel laureate is to be found (,albeit it usually is not the most often quoted scholar, who eventually is to be awarded the prize). However, I have established a citation-ranking-list of German historians - and found indeed a Nobel-prize winner (Theodor Mommsen) at the very top ...

Well, the next step might be to find out your own ideological life-cycle, be it a curve, a sine-curve (sinecure?) or something else: simply consult the relevant citation index (and compare with colleagues). But be warned: In the A&HCI, the average number of citations to authored cited items is no more than 1.01 - and by far not all scholars are listed! Maybe you don't WANT to know it?

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