

Restructurasation of the Concept of Empire in the Social Consciousness of Modern Americans

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Abstract : The paper looks into the structure and contents of the concept of empire in the social consciousness of modern Americans. To construct the model of this socially and politically relevant concept we have conducted an experiment with respondents born and living in the USA. Empire is seen as a historic notion describing such entities as the British empire, the Russian empire, the Ottoman empire and others. It seems that the democratic regime adopted by most countries worldwide is incompatible with imperial status of a country. Yet there are countries which tend to dominate in the contemporary world and though they are not routinely referred to as empires, in many respects they are reminiscent of historical empires. Thus, the central hypothesis of the study is that the concept of empire is cultivated in some states through the intermediary of the mass media though it undergoes a certain transformation to meet the expectations of a democratic society. The transformation implies that certain components which were historically embedded in its structure are drawn to the margins of the hierarchical structure of the concept whereas other components tend to become central to the concept. This process can be referred to as restructuration of the concept of empire. To verify this hypothesis we have conducted a study which falls into two stages. First we looked into the definition of empire featured in dictionaries, the dominant conceptual components of empire are: importance, territory/lands, recognition, independence, authority/power, supreme/absolute. However, the analysis of 100 articles from American newspapers chosen at random revealed that authors rarely use the word «empire» in its basic meaning (7%). More often «empire» is used when speaking about countries, which no longer exist or when speaking about some corporations (like Apple or Google). At the second stage of the study we conducted an associative experiment with the citizens of the USA aged 19 to 45. The purpose of the experiment was to find out the dominant components of the concept of empire and to construct the model of the transformed concept. The experiment stipulated that respondents should give the first association, which crosses their mind, on reading such stimulus phrases as “strong military”, “strong economy” and others. The list of stimuli features various words and phrases associated with empire including the words representing the dominant components of the concept of empire. Then the associations provided by the respondents were classified into thematic clusters. For instance, the associations to the stimulus “strong military” were compartmentalized into three groups: 1) a country with strong military forces (North Korea, the USA, Russia, China); 2) negative impression of strong military (war, anarchy, conflict); 3) positive impression of strong military (peace, safety, responsibility). The experiment findings suggest that the concept of empire is currently undergoing a transformation which brings about a number of changes. Among them predominance of positively assessed components of the concept; emergence of two poles in the structure of the concept, that is “hero” vs. “enemy”; marginalization of any negatively assessed components.

Keywords : associative experiment, conceptual components, empire, restructurasation of the concept

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