



Universität Konstanz

Kulturwissenschaftliches
Forschungskolleg
SFB 485 „Norm und
Symbol“



Final Conference “Precarious Figures – Political Upheaval” of the Collaborative Research Center / SFB 485 “Norm and Symbol” (26.-28.11.2009, Konstanz)

Conference Content

The conference topic “Precarious Figures – Political Upheaval” (*Prekäre Figuren – Politische Umbrüche*) takes up current debates on the “new precariat”, the “superfluous”, the “excluded” and the “disaffiliated”, and links them with questions of political upheavals, crises and transformations, which have been a focal point of the research work carried out in the last few years by the Collaborative Research Center/ SFB 485 “Norm and Symbol: The Cultural Dimension of Social and Political Integration”. Both concepts – “precarious figures” and “political upheavals” – are related to questions of social integration and disintegration. They mark, on the one hand, empirical phenomena and problem situations and, on the other, they represent epistemic figurations. The contributions and the discussions at the conference should also oscillate in the field of tension between these phenomenological and epistemological levels.

The concept “precarious figure” accordingly oscillates between two reference points. On the one hand it is directed at persons and groups of persons and, on the other, at discursive figurations. “Precarious” describes an in-between state, which forms a kind of no-man’s-land between inclusion and exclusion in the sense of Robert Castel’s “zone of vulnerability” and “disaffiliation” from social attachments – a zone which is characterized by its “precarious indecisiveness” (Heinz Bude) and by a situation of “neither-nor” and marks to this extent a place of placelessness and lack of orientation. Precarious positionality characterizes a social existence in which chance and not least biographical chance plays a particular part and in which what is contingent and fragile in social orders is directly experientable and is accordingly expressed. For this reason a particular and often also highly reflected “contingency competence” can be expected precisely from precarious figures. Whoever finds

himself within this zone of the precarious alternates between hopes of affiliation and success on the one hand and continual disappointment on the other; projections into the future acquire great weight and to this extent “project makers” are typical of this milieu. At the same time this is a place in which processes of subversion, disturbance of order and the dynamics of re-evaluation are set in motion to a particular degree. Examples of such precarious figures were prophets, heretics, reformers, political dissidents or even underground litterateurs (the *frondeurs littéraires*), as Robert Darnton described them for pre-revolutionary France.

At this point the link between precarious figures and social upheavals becomes clear. In both a personal and an epistemic sense such figures and the milieus they create form a kind of ferment; they bring diffuse states of social tension together with the ideas which are necessary to spark off revolutionary dynamics. This is true of the pamphleteers and pornographers on the eve of the French Revolution described by Darnton and equally so for the (pre)revolutionary discourses in later times – for example in Russia before 1917, in the 1920's in Germany or in Africa and Latin America during the second half of the 20th century. Nor should we forget all those visionary figures who were so to speak ahead of their times and were dismissed as madmen and crackpots because they indulged in ideological or religious fantasies which only later became the ferment of social upheavals. The history of the nationalisms of the 19th and 20th centuries, for example, can scarcely be written without such figures. A recurrent mechanism seems to be operating here according to which new social formations make use of the groundwork done by intellectuals unsure of their status, who under normal circumstances would have been ignored or marginalized as borderline cases.

It would, however, be simplifying the complexity of the problem sketched here to limit the treatment to individuals or groups, whose precarious positionality has rendered them effective as precursors, bearers or disseminators of “revolutionary ideas”. The reverse case can also be observed, namely that political upheavals for their part lead to a precarization of population groups, who, after being excluded from the present, seek their salvation by living out their dreams of utopias or their hopes of religious deliverance. Finally, precarization can lead to the maintenance of silence or to the

total loss of significance of semantic resources; here one might think, for example of the situation of functionaries and Marxist scientists in the GDR after 1989.

If one places the concept of the precarious in such a perspective of *longue durée*, a distinctive feature of the current discourse on the new precariat stands out, namely that it is cut off from any political or social-revolutionary dimension. It is, therefore, necessary to enquire about the specific conditions under which precarization triggers off “semantic overproduction” and unleashes a potential for protests and utopias or the opposite. To this extent the conference provides an opportunity to reflect upon the conceptual career of the term “precariat” against the background of its specific discursive logic and political relevance.