

Research Project A6

Time Diagnoses in the 17th Century: The Media of Social Self-Observation in the Sign of Crisis

Mitarbeiter:

- Schlögl, Rudolf, Dr. phil., Prof. (Research project leader)
Fachbereich Geschichte und Soziologie
- Schnadenberger, Eva, Research project member
Fachbereich Geschichte und Soziologie
- Wiebel, Eva, Research project member
Fachbereich Geschichte und Soziologie

Project description

This research project examines transformational processes of social self-observation in the 17th century, and especially the medial conditions of these transformations. In historiography of the last decades, the 17th century has been designated time and again as the century of crisis. The concept of crisis appears well-suited “for comprehending the particular instability of religion and the particular fascination of the religious in the era between the Reformation and the Enlightenment” (H. Lehmann). This approach gained plausibility by being able to point to a large reservoir of sources which gave expression to a contemporary awareness of crises. With respect to different contexts, objects and epistemological questions, there is a definite gap between experience and expectation, a deviation from normative conditions and changes which is difficult to account for.

In two delineated fields of discourse, this project pursues the shifting diagnoses of the period as well as the media which refer to them and in which they are manifested. To be examined is in what form past, present and future make reference to one another. Crisis is one of the concepts which makes it possible to combine past, present and future in an overarching category that transcends the unambiguous rupture.

Yet the notion of crisis awareness appears misleading to the extent that it removes the historicity of crisis discourses from the field of vision. Contemporaries of the 17th century described their world as “changed, inverted, disrupted, accelerated,” without reducing this to a concept of crisis as became virulent in the 18th century. In order to make the historicity of the category more discernable, our project speaks heuristically and more neutrally of a “transitory“ understanding of time. This notion connotes a specific awareness of time distinguished by a heightened sensitivity for variation, change, acceleration and disorder, yet it goes one step further by posing questions on different levels about discourse and epistemology. The changes observed could no longer be classified according to existing interpretive frameworks. Nor could they be grasped with the help of ready-made descriptive categories. This compelled contemporaries to observe their world more carefully, while at the same time observing the validity of their observations as well as the conclusions to be drawn from them. The discourse of the transitory is also and above all a discourse on media, turning

on the question of which media permit reliable statements to be made about the world and the future--or what can become a medium for these kinds of knowledge.

Within this process, the world becomes increasingly the object and horizon of self-observation processes. Using a concept of Joseph Vogl's, the project understands by the world "becoming medial" that the world is no longer simplistically that which is assumed by observation. Rather, it is also itself constituted by the observer in the act of observing. The relativity of reference to the world becomes conscious as a (historical) relation between observer and world. This fundamental self-reflexivity of observation and observer-position also includes the more and more imperative question of what is ultimately observable and what evades observation. In turn, there is an opening toward a horizon of the not-yet-perceived, the not-yet-observed. This already implies a potential opening of a horizon to a distant future time, while the expectation that a Day of Judgment is close at hand is still widespread.

The transformations discussed will be worked out in two fields of discourse: Sub-Project 1, "Divine Signs: The Mediality of the World in Tension between Apocalypse and Future" (Eva Schnadenberger), examines the late 16th and the first half of the 17th century. On the basis of sources such as miracle writings, calendars, and prognostica, we ask what these texts and images permit to become the medium for predicting and interpreting the world, how these sources fundamentally construct relationships between interpreting the present and predicting the future, and whether the reference points for prediction changed. The analytic focus is on how the discourse of media is realized in these sources and how relationships of observation are transformed and become reflexive.

In Sub-Project 2, "Diagnoses of Time and Concepts of Change in Liturgical Texts and Personal Accounts," (Eva Wiebel) the focus is on the second half of the 17th century. Liturgical texts (song- and prayerbooks, sermons, and eulogies) and selected personal accounts are analyzed to determine whether and how they introduced and mediated concepts of a transitory understanding of time in everyday religious life. The sources provide a broad basis for a topology of extra-scientific observations of the world and interpretations of time. Liturgical texts, when linked to other discourses, mediate highly effective ideas of time in crisis, intensifying the ideas so that repentance commanded is fulfilled. Mainly in Protestant areas, the appearance of song- and prayerbooks -- ever more numerous, more revised and more comprehensive -- makes evident how significant it became to achieve a commensurate outlook on situations and changes. In addition, sermons, eulogies and personal accounts will be looked at to see how they adopt patterns of historical argumentation and representation.