

Subject Matters: Subjects, Artefacts, Bodies. An International Postgraduate Conference on the Participants of Subjectivation.

Although it is disputable whether the 'cultural turn' and its equally dizzying siblings such as the 'practice' or 'somatic/ body turn' bring truly new phenomena to light, it has already come to pass that these new re- or even disorientations in the humanities and social sciences have at least brought forth new perspectives on the 'site of the social' (Schatzki). One such perspective is a praxeological theory of subjectivation that does not see the fully formed social actor as the starting point for theoretical analyses, but as a – sometimes highly improbable – social achievement whose observation and explanation is equally, if not more important for the understanding of social life than the modelling of the decisions of a rational actor.

This epoché of the actor as an entity that is theoretically presumed to be always fully primed for their role in social life emphasizes the ongoing accomplishment that is subjectivation, i.e., the self-forming or rather self-making process of working oneself and slipping into subject forms of everyday life. Moreover, once the theoretical leap of deconstructing the social actor has been taken, as if a veil has been lifted, it becomes unavoidable not to see social life as being filled with processes of self-making, -unmaking, and -modification and, thus, not to wonder whether understanding this ongoing subjectivation is an essential, hitherto underestimated key to understanding social life itself. Indeed, one could even ask whether the ready-to-act entity that is the theoretically established concept of the actor in social science corresponds empirically, or perhaps even has its empirical basis in the systematic illusion of everyday life that turns our attention away from the 'doing', and in our case, the 'doing subjects' that we are constantly engaged in.

Indeed, although self-making in our perspective is ubiquitous, the creation of the illusion of the 'ready made' actor is, similar to the creation of a theatre performance, more likely to be found in the 'back regions' (Goffman) of everyday life which the ethnomethodological 'studies of work' aimed to uncover. Furthermore, just as a good theatre performance not only requires actors, but also props, a stage, and lighting, the praxeological view of subjectivation recognizes the integral importance of various 'participants' (Hirschauer) in the process of self-making such as material artefacts, the space practices take place in, and even the very bodies of the subjects-in-the-making themselves. The term 'participant' signifies that these entities are not mere props for the actor on the stage of social life, but are in fact the 'site' of the performance itself, i.e., are not just a context but are co-constitutive for the taking and upholding of subject forms.

This emergent perspective on the site of the social, stemming from the cultural turn and spanning such diverse disciplines as art history, literature studies, history, philosophy, and sociology to name a few, has rapidly gained theoretical popularity in the last ten years, especially since the publication of "The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory" by Theodore Schatzki et al. However, our view is that this perspective still has both theoretically and empirically much solidification and clarification to go in order to truly prove itself and maybe even go beyond a mere (ontological) perspective and realize its full paradigmatic potential. It is to this clarification and solidification that we aim to contribute with our international postgraduate conference. In dealing with these 'matters of the subject' our approach is threefold:

Firstly, the term 'subject' itself contains much theoretical baggage that it seems unwise to ignore. Indeed, the traditional epistemological term 'subject' has a fascinating history of deconstruction

and rebirth in various guises such as subjectivity or subjectivation. In the troubled past and the criticism of this term we see an indicator for as yet unresolved theoretical issues, especially with regard to the question of how individuals become and are made into socially recognizable entities. In our panel “Subjects and Critique” we aim to put the polysemic nature of this term to use and investigate the demarcation of the diverse conceptions of subject, consider their respective analytical strengths and which possibilities and limitations result from them. In the end, we hope to get to grips with the main issue at the heart of these subject conceptions of the reciprocal relationship between individuality and sociality that can be conceived as autonomic isolation or social integration, but always carries with it a relationship of power and self-empowerment.

After dealing with the main matter of subjectivation with the subject itself, we will shift our attention in our second panel “Materiality-Artefacts-Space” towards matter itself, towards those things, organisms, and spaces that we consider co-constitutive for the process of self-making. However, the clarity of the general participation of matter in subjectification notwithstanding, there are quite diverse ways of conceiving the nexus of matter and those beings we call humans, as the ‘symmetrical anthropology’ of Bruno Latour demonstrates. Therefore, the aim of this panel is to collect and (critically) discuss these different perspectives on the material dimension of self-making.

Lastly, our final panel “Subjects of the Body” deals with the type of matter which, for humans at least, matters possibly the most, namely the body and/or bodies as participants of subjectivation. Just as praxeological subjectivation theory looks critically at the prerequisites of the social actor, we do not consider ‘the body’ to be a simply given entity, but rather a participant of self-making that, no less than material artefacts, forms and, moreover, is also formed by the process of subjectivation in a way that is not possible for inanimate matter that we do not ‘live in’. Following Loïc Wacquant’s well-known lament that there are still paradoxically few actual bodies of flesh and blood in social studies of the body, we aim to gather diverse empirical studies of bodies in self-making in order to show how many different ways bodies matter when individuals become and maintain their status as the subject of practices.

About the research training group

The DFG research training group “Self-Making. Practices of Subjectivation in Historical and Interdisciplinary Perspective” was founded on October 1st, 2010 at Oldenburg University. With the participation of the disciplines history, German studies, art history, philosophy, sport science/ sociology, and protestant theology the training group combines perspectives of both the humanities and social sciences.

The fundamental aim that the research group is built around is to inquire from a praxeological perspective how individuals become subjects of specific practices in diverse contexts and, conversely and perhaps more importantly, how they actively shape themselves into subjects and become recognizable and, moreover, gain recognition as subjects in and of practice. As a tentative answer to this question the attention of our research is drawn towards the study of embodied habitus, language, images, and material artefacts and their essential involvement in the process of subjectivation. Furthermore, this in our view explicitly active process of ‘doing subjects’ automatically implies the complementary activity of ‘doing culture’ and therefore the

question of how the participants of subjectivation processes contribute to the reproduction, shaping and change of the social world in which their (self-)making takes place.