Conference Concept

Selfhood as Self-Knowledge? The Relevance of the History of Knowledge for the Historicizability of the Subject

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Recently, the research premise has become well established that in many respects, it is more fruitful to conceive of 'the subject' as a localizable and historicizable phenomenon than as a universal category. The context dependency of self-making can be elucidated by the term subjectivation: the subject is not always already 'there', but is constituted and constitutes itself in a complex interplay between the individual and concrete contexts and objects of its actions and thinking. The methodological approach to the issues ensuing from this conception has been primarily informed by governmentalist and (in the German-speaking discussion) praxeological perspectives: on the one hand, the etymology of *sub-iectum* already points to the connection of submission and self-formation; on the other hand, the conception of the subject as action (vis-à-vis static being) widens the net to be able to capture the social interplay within which it both engages itself and is formed. Both approaches presuppose an implication of knowledge: the governmentalist view, by utilizing dispositives as power/knowledge complexes in their arguments[1]; the praxeological view, by presupposing meaning structures inscribed into practices in the form of 'codes'.[2]

With our conference, we aim to consider the issue of how this knowledge can be conceptualized and weigh up its methodological import for research utilizing the term subjectivation. Our line of inquiry goes beyond the matter of the localization of knowledge in the aforementioned approaches: we seek to clarify to what extent the history of knowledge of the subject – as a history of its scientific conceptions – is relevant for the research of subjectivation. To what extent does one become a subject due to the knowledge we have gleaned about being one? And to what extent is this knowledge renewed and transformed by this process? Thus, the aim of the conference is not to contribute a further theoretical history of the subject to the ones that are already in existence.[3] Instead, we are concerned with the issue of whether subjectivation is conceivable as a process not only originating in practices and power relationships, but also in knowledge – taking all (human scientific) discourses into account which vouch for the historical existence of a form of subject knowledge. For though many of the recent approaches to subject history can be gathered under the broad roof of discourse analysis, the fundamental element of the latter, namely the description of knowledge regimes, was not their central undertaking in the face of their social-historical

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[1] Nikolas Rose: Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Prverivate Self, London, Routledge, 1990; id., Inventing our Selves: Psychology, Power, and Personhood, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998.

[2] Andreas Reckwitz: Das hybride Subjekt. Eine Theorie der Subjektkulturen von der bürgerlichen Moderne zur Postmoderne, Weilerswist, Velbrück, 2006; Thomas Alkemeyer /Gunilla Budde / Dagmar Freist: Selbst-Bildungen: Soziale und kulturelle Praktiken der Subjektivierung, Bielefeld, Transcript, 2013.

[3] For philosophy and the history of literature cf. e.g. Jerrold Seigel: The Idea of the Self. Thought and Experience in Western Europe since the Seventeenth Century, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005; Peter Bürger: Das Verschwinden des Subjekts. Eine Geschichte der Subjektivität von Montaigne bis Barthes, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1998.

perspectives in a broad sense of the term. Thus, it is the aim of this conference to emphasize the value of such a description for subject-historical reflection.[4]

This aim entails several further questions, first, with regard to the subject matter and form of subject-historical knowledge, second, in relation to the consequences which could ensue from a history of knowledge focus for the definition of the subject as historicizable and for issues of subjectivation. Whereas in French philosophy there is already a subject-historical approach which remains true to the philosophical core of the term by conceiving the subject as a form of reflexive self-referentiality and by anchoring its historicizability in specific forms of knowledge which give this self-referentiality concrete form and act as its mediator[5], in the mainly praxeological German language debate the subject is generally conceived as being historical in the respect that the concrete life-world contexts of its actions presuppose subjectivation. However, it seems plausible to suppose the possibility of a history of knowledge of the subject, which, via the discursive overlaps and interconnections of disciplines such as theology, philosophy, psychology, political theory, and social sciences (and also literature and other arts), could culminate in a description of historical subject forms whose periodization is orientated to the congruency of the development of theoretical knowledge, and, thus, probably would take on a different shape vis-à-vis the primarily sociological (i.e., praxeological and governmentalist) approaches.[6]

The question of how these approaches could complement one another also implies the question of what form knowledge regarding the subject takes. Firstly, it is necessary to differentiate highly formalized, academic knowledge discourses from popular scientific or 'inter-discourses' transporting knowledge in forms which utilize more symbolic or metaphoric packaging (and, thus, perhaps in forms more palatable for subjectivation)[7]; furthermore, it seems prudent to consider seriously how the above-named approaches privilege respective knowledge forms. For example, it is apparent that governmentalist approaches focus upon knowledge regarding disciplinary institutions and knowledge relevant for application (e.g., therapy) and praxeological approaches, in turn, are primarily invested in uncovering non-propositional, implicit, and process-orientated knowledge forms (know how). In contrast, epistemologically informed discourse analyses are concerned with theoretical substance and concepts. This difference coincides with, amongst other things, the issue of whether historical knowledge is to be described as a heterogeneous conglomerate of loosely coupled and, perhaps, contradictory elements leading to a hybrid conception of subjectivation or whether logical coherence is attributed to discursive regularities leading to a conception of subjectivation as a meaningful concentration of conceptual ways of thinking in a certain form of self-referentiality. Thus, at the heart of the conception of this

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[4] Philipp Sarasin's history of the hygiene discourse can be seen as pioneering in this sense: Philipp Sarasin: Reizbare Maschinen. Eine Geschichte des Körpers 1765-1914, Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp, 2001.

[5] Marcel Gauchet: L'idée d'une histoire du sujet, in: id., La condition historique. Entretiens avec François Azouvi et Sylvain Piron, Paris, Gallimard, 2003, pp. 251-291; id., Personne, individu, sujet, personnalité, in: id. / Jean-Claude Quentel (eds.), Histoire du sujet et Théorie de la personne, Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2009, pp. 11-22. Thus, subjectivity is of course already not defined as pure self-presence, but rather as self-referentiality in the sense of criteria-orientated 'knowledge'. Cf. Manfred Frank: Subjekt, Person, Individuum, in: id. / Willem van Reijen (eds.), Die Frage nach dem Subjekt, Frankfurt a. M., Suhrkamp, 1988, pp. 7-28, here p. 15.

[6] For an attempt in this direction cf. Sandra Janßen: Phantasmen. Imagination in Psychologie und Literatur 1840-1930. Flaubert – Čechov – Musil, Göttingen, Wallstein Verlag, 2013 (Wissenschaftsgeschichte).

[7] Inspiring thinking in this regard can be found in Jürgen Link: Subjektivitäten als interdiskursive Ereignisse. Mit einem historischen Beispiel (der Kollektivsymbolik von Maschine vs. Organismus) als Symptom diskursiver Positionen, in: Reiner Keller / Werner Schneider / Willy Viehöver (eds.), Diskurs - Macht - Subjekt. Theorie und Empirie von Subjektivierung in der Diskursforschung, Wiesbaden, VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2011, pp. 53-67.

conference is the issue of how these diverse knowledge forms can be mediated with each other or merge within the concept of subjectivation.

The issues relating to knowledge listed thus far also hint at the need of differentiating the concept of subjectivation accordingly. Whereas the praxeological view tends to locate historically determined structures on the side of practices while seeing the subject in connection with the (idiosyncratic) individual acquisition and transformation of such practices[8], the history of knowledge perspective on the subject makes clear that the factor of (reflexive) self-referentiality also needs to be qualified with regard to its historicizability.[9] This does not entail methodologically disposing of the tension between historical determination and individual autonomy, which praxeological subjectivation theories attempt to capture, in favour of discourses. However, it does imply the question of the specificity of subjectivation in the medium of knowledge, as compared to other forms of subjectivation (and, thus, the question of how subjectivation is describable from the viewpoint of historical epistemology). Thus, it is not our aim to question the relationship between knowledge and subjectivation as an inquiry into the existence of 'discourse positions' and their amenability for subjectivation in the sense of participation in a discursive power structure, as this often is the case in work following Foucault's Archaeology of Knowledge (the conference is not concerned with the history of the 'knowledgeable subject'). Rather, it is up for debate whether discursively conceived subject models necessarily delimit or, indeed, also enable individual autonomy.[10]

A preliminary hypothesis regarding how subjectivation in the context of knowledge discourses differs from subjectivation as a sociologically describable phenomenon can be gleaned from the observation that subjectivation in praxeological and governmentalist contexts is treated as the respective acquisition and filling in of concrete life-world action and social frameworks. Subsequently, subjectivation is seen primarily in respect to identity formation. A critique of this view from the angle of a history of knowledge could be that whoever deems subjectivation to be the answer to the question "Who am I?" is effectively not inquiring into the subject, but rather the self. On a history of science perspective, which takes theoretical definitions of subjectivity into account, the line of inquiry relevant for subjectivation could be summed up with "How do I function?": subject forming would then be self-referentiality mediated by knowledge, e.g., on the basis of psychological models which preform the notion of the individual via its own possible and probable streams of consciousness. That such forms of knowledge can have a pivotal effect on subjectivation can, for instance, be gathered from a history of literature collating the changing forms of the depiction of consciousness.[11] Thus, one of the central questions of the conference will be which types of knowledge can contribute to being able to reconceptualize subjectivation as a matter of reflexive self-relations.

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[8] Cf. Thomas Alkemeyer: Subjektivierung in sozialen Praktiken. Umrisse einer praxeologischen Analytik, in: id. / Gunilla Budde /Dagmar Freist: Selbst-Bildungen: Soziale und kulturelle Praktiken der Subjektivierung, Bielefeld: Transcript, 2013, pp. 33-68; ders. / Nikolaus Buschmann / Matthias Michaeler: Kritik der Praxis. Plädoyer für eine subjektivierungstheoretische Erweiterung der Praxistheorien, in: id. / Volker Schürmann / Jörg Volbers (eds.), Praxis denken. Konzepte und Kritik, Wiesbaden, Springer VS, 2015, pp. 25-50.
[9] Cf. Gauchet, also in fn. 5.
[10] Cf. Philipp Sarasin's reflections on the hygiene discourse as an autonomy project in the sense of a *souci de soi*; Sarasin, Reizbare Maschinen, pp. 20-29.
[11] Cf. Janßen, also in fn. 6.