Structure, culture, contingency?

How to explain change?

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Which factors lead to change or trigger certain dynamics? What do ideas, conflicts or actors contribute to change? What is the role of institutions and »organizational fields« (DiMaggio 1983)? What prevents change and what causes barriers? Do structures still matter? What about social mechanisms? And on the other hand: Are, perhaps, dynamics and change mainly generated contingently?

At the Second Annual Seminar of the *Bielefeld Graduate School in History and Sociology* in February 2010, thirty PhD candidates and a number of distinguished scholars engaged in these questions.[1] It turned out that scores of the presentations centred on the challenge given by the cultural approach and its accompanying »turns« in different disciplines. The five contributions chosen for the here presented issue reflect this emphasis. The fruitful and inspiring fashion[2] of the various »turns«, also in the field of »Dynamics and Change«, allowed to indicate the complexity of the topic and the contingency of knowledge. Thus, this issue will not present revolutionary methodological or theoretical innovations. But it can be illustrated once more how interesting the cultural turn still is, especially for younger scholars. Although the end of the cultural turns has been adjured for years by its objectors, the culturalistic approach is still amaz-

1 Cf. the conference report by Tobias Graf et al. *Dynamics and Change. 2nd Annual Seminar, Bielefeld Graduate School in History and Sociology*. 8.1.2010-10.1.2010 (sic! 8.2.-10.2.2010), Bielefeld. H-Soz-u-Kult, 6.4.2010 (http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/tagungsberichte/id=3058. All quotations of the seminar can be found in this paper.

2 Cf. about fashion and history Kocka 2008; Stamm-Kuhlmann 2004.

ingly fresh and fertile (see e.g. Biernacki et al. 1999; Verheyen 2010; Welskopp 2010; Rubin 2009; Stollberg-Rilinger 2008; Reckwitz 2008).

In these contributions for *InterDisciplines* one can find, apart from this general tendency, three further similarities which try to describe and analyze dynamics and change:

The first point is the close connection between change, conflict and stability. Starting with Auguste Comte, social ›change‹ for a long time was regarded to be contrary to ›order‹. Today there is a consensus that order and change are complementary perspectives, and that they depend on each other. Stability and order require change. Processes of social change are therefore often explained by discrepancies and tensions. The Conflict Theory interprets competition or structural inequality as major motors for change and hence for the order of society. Helmut Schelsky, in turn, points out that social order cannot be imagined without questioning conventional structures (Schelsky 1980). The cover of the present issue emblematizes this close connection. It shows a scene from the *National Ballet of China's* program in honor of the sixtieth anniversary of the People's Republic of China. By referring to the revolutionary events it is manifested how important change is to establish a new order – an order, whose definite regime and problematic stability is clarified via the propagandistic aesthetic. But at the same time the picture also symbolizes: If dynamics and change fail to appear, staging and propagandistic activism do replace them.

By analyzing the importance of dissatisfaction, the sociologist Olga Galanova shows how strongly ›order‹ and ›disorder‹ are interwoven. The permanent critical reflection challenges institutions to the fast and effective development of their functions according to new requirements. Also Jan-Markus Kötter in his contribution »Stability and threat to the order of the church« gives a fine example of the interlacement of stability on the one hand and the challenge of order on the other hand. Personalization in the church in Late Antiquity led to great tensions; but at the same time personalization reduced the complexity of the theological debate. Furthermore, as »personalization in tradition, denotation and expectation allowed for a constant self-reference of the order within the

church, this constituted the actual factor of stability« (51). In Anna Zaytseva's article about the interdependence of work norms and sanctioning behavior, dynamics and change are produced by tense competition. Zaytseva illustrates – as Ralf Dahrendorf has it – the »antagonism between rights and offers (*Antagonismus von Anrechten und Angebot*), between demanding and saturated groups« (*zwischen fordernden und saturierten Gruppen*, Dahrendorf 1992: 8).

The militant dancers on the cover point to the often problematic power of this »antagonisms«. A title like »Dynamics and Change« easily evokes positive connotations. But instead, change is often effectuated by brutal rivalry, even war, chaos, and violence. Hedwig Richter in her examination of voting practices in the 19th century shows the overwhelming impact of brutality and war to establish a new election order and broaden the suffrage. If conservative societies like that of the planters in South Carolina tried to prevent change for decades, and if performances and activism do not work anymore, the result is a total breakdown of the old system – and even deeper social change.

There is a second tendency mirrored in all five texts of this issue: To explain and analyze processes and changes, the contributors use diverse theories and methods. Martin Diewald, a quantitative working sociologist, in his keynote speech about »Social mechanisms explaining stability and change« gives an idea of how reasonable it may be to play theories and methods off against each other. Instead, Diewald recommends to quest for common grounds. Diewald defines mechanisms as causal links between an initial constellation and an outcome. They are the focus of a more modest approach of understanding change without involving ›grand theories‹ but while offering a taxonomy of possible explanations that can be applied to individual cases. Diewald opted for using mechanisms as tools for individual studies rather than trying to construct a »general grammar of the social« from them. In the discussion after the lecture it became clear that due to its middle range and its sensitivity for empirical diversity the mechanism approach might provide a common ground for empirically-minded sociologists and historians alike to explain change.

The contributers of this *InterDisciplines* issue try to combine the advantages of the cultural approach and those of the structural one. The historian Hans-Christian Petersen picks this idea out as a central theme in his study on inequalities and differentiation in the urban space. At the same time he underlines that this connection of different approaches is typical for a development which for years has been found all over the world (Eley 2005; Mergel 2005: 360). As a matter of fact, this syncretism often merges very contradictory methods and theories, and one can accuse it of being somewhat arbitrary (Kocka 2008: 143). But the syncretism is without any doubt helpful for concrete research practices; it helps with achieving an informed analysis which aims at including different aspects of the empiricism.

The eclectic approach correlates with another trend: instead of only one factor now multifactorial developments explain change and explicate transformations. For example, there is the question of the influence of ideas, of worldviews and orders of knowledge. Jan Assmann at the Annual Seminar indicated the impact of tradition in his opening keynote lecture about »Cultural memory and the dynamics of change and fixation«. For Assmann the crucial question is not concerning ›dynamics‹ or ›change‹ as such, but in which way dynamics and changes are mediated by cultural memory. »Writing creates history where myth was.« Therefore, it is the cultural memory that constructs dynamics and change. But this prospect has been seen by some as being too one sided. The contributors to this issue, for instance, point to the importance of actors, of structures or of socioeconomical terms. Kötter as well as Zaytseva connect the level of actors with the level of structures. By analyzing the entanglement of micro and macro level and by investigating in how far they are causally combined, the contributors are just very much in line with the trend.

The authors focus on topics which have been neglected for quite a long time. Petersen quotes Christoph Cornelißen, who speaks of the »return of social history« (Cornelißen 2008). Thereby, classical questions of social history can be targeted again. Petersen gives a good example of that. [3]

Obviously this is part of the cultural turns: everything can be incorporated, dichotomies and grand theories are eyed with suspicion and distrust, no either-or, no hierarchies, no ›good‹ versus ›bad‹ approaches.[4] In this sense, Ute Daniel calls for skepticism towards the »world of ›facts‹«. She advises to »sample the pleasures« of the inevitable relativeness of science and to give up on »the ritualistic forms of evidencing and proofing through accumulation of footnotes« (Daniel 2001: 16). This gaily abandonment of seeking the truth and this eclecticism – which is our third point – consistently gets contingency on board. At the Annual Seminar there was an intensive debate about the role of contingency in processes of change. In his keynote speech »Contingency and the impossibility of calculating change« Arnd Hoffmann offered valuable definitions of key concepts for getting change into perspective. Based on Niklas Luhmann and Reinhart Koselleck, Hoffmann argued against a historiography that interprets dynamics and change as an inevitable outcome of structural constellations. Instead, contingency, as experienced by historic actors, has to be taken into account. Actors perceive reality in the horizon of other possibilities, and they also consider the behavior of other actors. Tracing change requires that the view of historic subjects has to be taken into account.

The inclusion of contingency is noteworthy. The former disregard of this factor derived from the fact that in the end contingency somehow counteracts analysis and explanation. Because the concept describes »something given (something experienced, expected, remembered, fantasized)

3 It is of note that also Hans-Ulrich Wehler (2006) explains how fruitful it could be to embrace like the British cultural anthropology »hard social, economical and political structures«.

4 It seems to be a justified question if this access may sometimes end up with an »intelectual suicide« (Daniel 2001: 16).

in the light of its possibly being otherwise, it describes objects within the horizon of possible variations« (Niklas Luhmann 1984, quoted in 1995: 106). Thus, the authors use the concept of contingency thriftily and apply it only to three fields: They refer to the diversity of empiricism, to the influence of actors (as mentioned before) and – connected to both – to the fundamental influence of negotiations. All of these three points are typical for a cultural perspective.

Especially the impact of individual actors is stressed in later theories, like Dahrendorf's conflict theory, that is meant to explain change. Galanova states that she does not want to start »from the unquestioned fact of the social order«, but instead from the actors whose respectively individual communication produces order in the semantic field of dissatisfaction. Thus, the new balance of order is a product of negotiations; through processes of negotiation the order gains legitimacy and therefore validity. Anna Zaytseva, who in her study on a hotel comes »closer to the diversity of empirical evidence«, can exemplify very similarly in how far norms can be regarded as social constructs emerging through interactions and negotiations (32). Contingency arises from the consideration that things are constructed; the construction reveals its character through the view of actors and their negotiations. Hence, also Kötter states that church order was also a personally transmitted illusion of concord, permanently threatened by disruption. All in all, the contributors show: There is hardly any order without change – and no order without a process of negotiation.

Hans-Christian Petersen demonstrates by the example of a city – St. Petersburg in the second half of the 19th century – in how far the socially underprivileged have not merely been the victims of unequal social circumstances and other factors. Petersen's focus on actors can reveal in what way these people also »struggled individually and jointly against their situation on the margins of society by interpreting and adopting social space« (104). Thereby, Peterson also wants to keep an eye on structures. And because at the same time he makes the question of social inequality the focus of his study he can fathom how advantageous it may

be to use both the cultural perspective and classical questions of social history.

Petersen's and also Richter's contributions, which in spite of a decided cultural approach allude to the impact of structures, point out to one of the leading questions of the Annual Seminar: Can we dispense with structures? Certainly there are research projects that are not in the need of an analytical frame of structures – but the incorporation of structures can be an important enrichment. Given the culturalistic arbitrariness, structures can help to ground the research question and to make it relevant for broader questions and the broader scientific discourse.

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