

Project Group A1

The Exceptional as Enthrallment and Provocation. Comparative Historical Semantics of the Heroic from 1780 to 1850

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The project group's objective was to investigate diachronic shifts in, and the synchronic range of, the concept of the hero in France and Germany in the period between 1750 and 1825. The concept was considered both as an indicator of and as a factor in social realities and their development over time. The project focused on conflicts over interpretation and the instrumentalization of the semantic field. Of primary concern was thus the discourse of political heroism.

In the realm of historical semantics, the hero is not a concept of a political or social movement but rather a "traditional concept" (*Traditionsbegriff*).¹ Thus it does not mark a division between older and newer semantics but rather allows recourse to be made to older concepts. Nevertheless, heroic discourse changed in the period under investigation. The concept of the hero became more human, bourgeois and democratic; it was nationalized and pluralized. This development can be observed in both of the countries studied, although processes of embourgeoisement, democratization, and nationalization began noticeably earlier in France. Whereas before 1750 the hero tended to be defined as an aristocratic warrior, was regarded as an unapproachable deity, and in most cases was acknowledged by all, around 1820 an ordinary citizen could also become a hero. He could have weaknesses and belong to various professions, but his status as a hero tended to be circumscribed to his own nation. Hence, the heroic virtues evolved ever more closely with the needs of civil society. And thus the ideal of usefulness, work ethic and conformity tended to be esteemed more highly than extravagance, ties to one's own class, and transgression.

Another feature of the historical semantics of the lexical field, at least until 1815, was the decidedly public character of heroism. Private heroism existed, but only later in the nineteenth century did it (once again) play a larger role. A result of the hero's public character and conformity with norms was that transgression became a rarity (exceptions being made for individuals like Napoleon, or course). The typical hero of this age tended not to overstep social rules. This stands in contrast to the heroes of previous and later epochs.

In light of our research, the period under investigation can be divided into five phases, each marked by characteristic trends and features. The divisions aligned with major political changes, a result influenced above all by the comparative nature of the investigation and by convergences and divergences in Franco-German history.

The first phase: from 1750 to 1774. The gradual rise of bourgeois ideas of morality (merit over privilege of birth) meant a change in thinking with regard to what it meant to be a hero. In addition, the Enlightenment ideas then taking root tended to devalue martial virtue, which before then had been essential to heroic status. One result was the propagation of an alternative model that threatened to supplant the traditional hero: the *grand homme*.² This model, however, only managed to replace the hero in exceptional cases. In general it was absorbed by the concept of the hero. A prominent example of this is the definition found in

¹ Koselleck, R. 1978: Begriffsgeschichte und Sozialgeschichte, in: id. (ed.), Historische Semantik und Begriffsgeschichte, Stuttgart, p. 27.

² Bonnet, J. 1998: Naissance du Panthéon: essai sur le culte des grands hommes, Paris.

the *Encyclopédie* (1765), which reached an extensive audience and was thus decisive for contemporary semantics.

So far developments in France have shaped this discussion, but they soon found their way into the German discourse of heroism as well. The semantics of the war hero persisted, but sophistication and contributions to the common good now increased in importance. The Seven Years' War can be seen as a turning point. The heroes of this war were all, or predominantly, described as civilized. In addition, this war gave the concept of the hero a patriotic charge. This facilitated the later nationalization of heroic semantics, but it also allowed for the continuing veneration of foreign heroes. As the importance assigned to patriotism increased, definitions of the hero could all the more easily ignore social station and permit the heroization of everyday citizens. In Germany, this development resulted in a clear emphasis on Germanic mythology, although the latter never supplanted the reference culture of antiquity and was generally deprecated by the most important authors of the time. In France, the king's failures led to a loss of his appeal as a heroic figure, and praise of him thus often ossified into a mere formality. In contrast, in Germany the concept of the monarchical hero endured, especially thanks to the reform-minded version of enlightened absolutism and the special status accorded to Frederick II, who enjoyed the reputation of an inspiring war hero and *roi connétable*.

Second phase: from 1775 to 1788. This phase begins with a crucial turning point in history: the American Revolution. Contemporaries considered the Americans a heroic people whose egalitarian civil society not only provided the foundation for the French Revolution but also decisively inspired the semantics of heroism. In this period, the concept of the hero became increasingly peaceful and civilized. Heroism was now essentially defined by achievement. Even outwardly typical and conventional heroic figures like noble warriors had to justify their heroic status (and thus also the superiority of the nobility) with extraordinary deeds outside the military sphere. For the first time, the heroism of humble folk and everyday heroism played a larger role. The lifesaver became a paradigmatic hero of the age. On the outer margins, the possibility of female heroism was now also pondered and debated, although this debate was much livelier in France than in its neighbour. The reason for this was likely the precedent set by the French national heroine Jeanne d'Arc, who, despite female-dominated courtly and salon culture, had no counterpart in Germany. Quite a few authors refused to apply the term 'hero' to heroized women.

Third phase: from 1789 to 1799. The French Revolution tremendously accelerated the development described so far. Yet it was initially less the cause of a totally new semantics of heroism than a catalyst for processes that had already been set in motion. In France, the revolutionary regimes 'invented' popular heroism, while class privileges fell away. At the same time, the king formally stood out from this collective as the premier hero. With the Women's March on Versailles and the patriotic agitation of Olympe de Gouges, the importance of female heroism grew swiftly in France. After the arrest and execution of the king, the hero was redefined as a patriotic Republican by the revolutionary state, which monopolized the discourse of heroism and instrumentalized it for pedagogical purposes, especially during the Reign of Terror. Bourdon's 1793 *Recueil* thus expressly portrayed a heroic pantheon that demanded everyday heroism from each individual, especially women. This recognition on the part of the state was the high water mark of heroism being ascribed to women. This pedagogy of heroism was aimed primarily at the mass recruitment necessary for the protection of the revolutionary state from foreign foes. During the war, the concept of the hero also began to be remilitarized.

In Germany, many authors made recourse to heroic figures of their own German past (both recent and remote), such as “the Great Elector”. An example of this dialectical appropriation of the French model is Hofmann’s *Pantheon der Deutschen* (1794). In contrast, Meißner’s *Spartakus* (1793) evinced the democratic strain of the discourse of heroism. The heroization of Charlotte Corday, who had killed the revolutionary icon Marat, fired the hitherto neglected debate about female heroes. Female heroism was thus on the ascent in Germany as well.

But the descent began right after the peak was reached. In France, women’s political organizations were banned, and a more conventional concept of the hero was promoted under the Directory – a process later propelled by Napoleon as well. When the revolutionary army overran the Netherlands in 1795, thus transforming its purpose from defending the fatherland to expanding the realm, the conquering hero was rehabilitated.

Fourth phase: from 1800 to 1814. Napoleon was the incarnation of the conqueror and the republican war hero. The commanding individual now returned to the semantic field. Yet Napoleon drew on various concepts and sought to unite diverse heroic roles in himself, which occasionally resulted in a new standard of heroism: Bonaparte/Napoleon was a general, a revolutionary, and a *grand homme* all in one. He is thus a prime example of the pluralization of the concept of the hero. In Germany, the concept tended to be more strongly democratized than was the case in the third phase. The wars that began in 1792 drove this process on – and more so than in France, where socio-political upheavals helped make civic engagement, alongside military fame, a path to advancement and recognition. An important, highly impactful illustration of the development of heroic semantics in Germany is Frederick William III’s appeal *An die Preußen* (1813), which, similar to Bourdon’s *Recueil* of 20 years earlier, held out the prospect of heroism to all soldiers. Meanwhile, the nationalization of the concept of the hero was strengthened in all comparative cases. In Germany, this process was decisively catalysed by the French occupation and the “War of Liberation”, as it was called. That spelled the end of the hero’s universalism or cosmopolitanism.

Fifth phase: from 1815 to 1825. The period of the Restoration was marked by a diversification of the concept of the hero. In addition, a new process of embourgeoisement set in. There was no longer any consensus about what qualities the hero had, and various semantics (monarchical-royal, Enlightened-bourgeois, revolutionary) existed side by side. The new embourgeoisement meant that middle-class virtues increasingly determined what it meant to be a hero; after the transgressive figure of Napoleon, the hero who conformed to norms was now on the rise. Everyday and private heroism gained greater importance, as the patriotic valence of heroism weakened in the wake of peace. Heroines were talked about, but their heroism was mostly passive and characterized by gender-specific virtues aloof from the political sphere. At the same time, the concept of the hero continued to be nationalized. Sartori’s *Pantheon denkwürdiger Wunderthaten volkstümlicher Heroen und furchtbarer Empörer des österreichischen Gesamt-Reiches* (1816) stands as an example of the attempt to establish a heroic pantheon for promoting national consciousness via a community-building narrative.

Publications produced by project group A1

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