

Project Group B7

The Hero as a Disturbing Element: The Sociology of Exceptionality

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Sociology developed in the nineteenth century as an aheroic, or antiheroic, field of study. Sociologists concentrated on the investigation of social rules and regularities as well as the causes of crises and deficiencies of social order. Throughout this endeavor, it has viewed heroic figures as a kind of disturbance because of their exceptionality. The goal of this project was therefore to employ this disturbance in a productive way by 1) identifying heroic figures in sociological literature despite a dominant orientation toward order, while looking at what role these figures have played in the discipline's development; 2) using this to sensitize sociological theories to singular and exceptional phenomena. The study therefore focused on what traces of the heroic and what kind of semantics, metaphors, and/or narratives of exceptionality can be found in the canon and self-understanding of sociology. For this purpose, early sociological texts (prior to the First World War) were analyzed according to the tension between an orientation toward order and a focus on the exceptional. Studies on the history of sociology were also compounded into a sociological theory of the exceptional. These sociological insights into the connection between order and the extraordinary became building blocks for establishing a comprehensive theoretical framework of the heroic that could be used in the SFB's research program as a whole.

(1) Heroic Motifs in the Sociological Discourse

Despite their orientation toward order and normality, the corpus of early sociological works revealed a wide variety of heroic figurations in which two main aspects emerged: 1) discussions of heroic figures, and 2) authors representing themselves as heroes. It also became clear that the heroic figures found in the corpus of texts were generally either “heroes of thought” or “great men” – two types that emerged alongside the “warrior hero” in the late eighteenth century. For instance, in his study of the history of “geniuses” in science, A. Comte describes figures who made a lasting contribution to the history of knowledge through their intellectual achievements and service to humanity (Schlechtriemen 2015a). A. Quételet, on the other hand, studies “hommes supérieurs” (superior men), which he understood primarily as heroes of thought who stand out due to their intellectual deeds. He also writes about political leaders, whom he regarded as “interpreters of the whole,” capable of “touching both the mind and the heart” (Schlechtriemen 2016a). Finally, H. Spencer uses the “great men theory” in historicism as a negative example that erroneously holds up the “heroic deeds of great men” as the motors and origins of historic change. In its place, he derived the phenomenon of great men from complex historical developments, or the “social aggregate,” of a certain generation (Schlechtriemen 2016a).

K. Marx, for his part, also identifies an “age poor in heroes and events” in his essay *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*. At the same time, however, he ascribes a heroic role to the proletariat in his writings about the history of politics. He presents the working class as the subject of history tasked with resolving the historical dialectics of class struggle. It is important to note here that Marx's charging of the proletariat with this meaning is a collective form of heroization.

What resounds in Marx's requiem for heroic days gone by is described much more clearly in M. Weber's discussion of the heroic. Weber relies on heroic deeds and past virtues to critically

illuminate the culture of his own day and age within the development of modern society, which he regards as tragic. Furthermore, Weber's idea of charisma and É. Durkheim's description of collective effervescence both center around exceptionalism.

In addition to the heroes so explicitly addressed in this approach, another heroic motif could be found in the way authors of sociological works represent themselves as heroic founders of the field of sociology. Comte, for example, presents himself as a founder of a universal science, of which sociology is the highest form. A close rhetorical reading of his writing reveals that he relied on the *conversio*, or reverse, motif of a divine calling (Schlechtriemen 2015a). He also describes himself as a *grand homme* (great man) who brings comprehensive order to this new field of study. Likewise, Spencer's heroization of himself can be found in his autobiography, where he not only makes himself the main focus according to the norms of this genre; he also ascribes such exceptional characteristics as originality and impartiality to himself. For both Comte and Spencer, presenting themselves in a heroic light is thus intended to boost their scientific reputations, which they relied on specifically to solidify their roles as founding figures of sociology.

Quételet's and Spencer's works, on the other hand, demonstrate how heroic figures played only a minor role in the development of sociology in the middle and late 19th century. When heroic figures do appear, they are explained in a decentralized manner through their relation to their social environment. Quételet, for example, regards heroic figures as statistical exceptions, while Spencer emphasizes their social origin and position in history. Comte and Spencer both present themselves as heroes, also to increase their reputation and prestige as founding figures. This changed around 1900, however, as can be seen in Max Weber's works. Instead of making themselves out to be heroes who made important scholarly achievements, sociologists began to acquire an attitude of the tragic heroism of endurance. In addition, heroism was not simply "sociologized away," as with Quételet and Spencer; instead, it was made the subject of sociological reflection in Weber's charisma theory.

(2) *Theories of Exceptionalism*

Based on these studies of Comte, Quételet, Spencer, and Marx, the project group analyzed the conflict between the heroic figures and the central concepts of order in sociology. In this conflict, the hero (and other representations of extraordinariness) functions as a liminal figure that not only embodies the values and regulations of social order in a unique way, but also transgresses these as a troublemaker who disturbs the formation of sociological theories. The project group leader and assistant concentrated on this aspect, which is so essential for the study of the heroic, in a special issue of the magazine *Behemoth* and in their anthology *Das Andere der Ordnung. Theorien des Exzeptionellen* (The Other of Order. Theories of the Exceptional) (Bröckling et al. 2014; 2015). The comprehensive, programmatic introduction in the anthology focuses on extraordinary phenomena that are usually treated as exceptions, deviations, lacks, disturbances, or as white noise that diminishes into epiphenomena. It thus demonstrates how, in general, the analysis of heroization processes is concerned with determining how the interaction between heroized figures and the collective norm, or normality, functions. The focus of analysis shifts from the hero (or heroine) to the symbolic processes of drawing borders and creating meaning – processes that help to create them as heroes (Bröckling et al. 2016; Schlechtriemen 2016b).

The project group established the following conclusions: 1) a sociological, theoretical approach was developed that takes the tension between concepts of order and exceptional figures into account; 2) this approach was used to study canonical sociological works written during the founding period to determine how heroic figures are discussed; 3) because heroic figures are

exceptional and often pose a special challenge to sociological approaches based on order, the group investigated an important approach to heroism; 4) these studies provided the starting point for fundamental ideas about processes of heroization; 5) these also acted as the starting point for a study of theories of exceptionality in which a potential research perspective in the social sciences and cultural studies that is sensitive to the other of order was explored.

The many different approaches to heroic figures within the SFB were also useful for this project group's focus on exceptional phenomena. The study of heroization processes was thus instructive for the analysis of the basic socio-theoretical aspects of cultural boundaries and the contact between cultures, as well as for the analysis of dynamics such as polarization and affective charge.

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