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'REWRITING SOCIALITY' – SOCIOGRAPHICITY AS A CONCEPT FOR COMPREHENDING EMANCIPATORY PRACTICE AND SOCIAL CHANGE

ABSTRACT

The aim of the paper is to highlight the capacity of social actors, groups and communities to critically reflect on sociality and the question of how the spaces we live in together are created and constructed. In doing so, the contribution explores the interplay between individual and collective modes of learning. The author argues in this context that theories dealing with the dialectical relationship between structures and subjects somewhat overlook the relevance of civil spheres. Drawing on empirical research of social movements, emancipatory practices and social change, the author developed a theoretical tool which allows mapping processes of 'rewriting sociality' and its relation to biographical learning as well as community and societal learning. The article reviews biographicity as a rich and generative concept and will pay particular attention to questions of intersubjectivity and the social world as a relational sphere. Finally, the paper focuses on aspects of social movement practices and questions concerning the reproduction and transformation of social conventions and normative assumptions.

Keywords: *biographical research, sociographicity, biographicity, transitional learning, social movements, emancipatory practice*

»PREOBLIKOVANJE DRUŽBENOSTI« – SOCIOGRAFIČNOST KOT KONCEPT RAZUMEVANJA EMANCIPATORNE PRAKSE IN DRUŽBENIH SPREMEMB – POVZETEK

Namen članka je poudariti zmožnost družbenih akterjev, skupin in skupnosti, da kritično reflektirajo družbenost in vprašanje, kako so ustvarjeni in oblikovani prostori, kjer skupaj živimo. Avtorica pri tem raziskuje interakcijo med individualnimi in kolektivnimi oblikami učenja ter v tem kontekstu zagovarja tezo, da teorije, ki se ukvarjajo z dialektičnim odnosom med strukturami in subjekti, nekoliko spregledajo pomen civilnih sfer. Na podlagi empirične raziskave družbenih gibanj, emancipatornih praks in družbenih sprememb je razvila teoretično orodje, s katerim lahko opredelimo procese novega ubesedenja oziroma preoblikovanja družbenosti in povezavo tako z biografskim kot s skupnostnim in družbenim

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učenjem. Članek predstavlja biografičnost kot bogat in generativen koncept ter še posebej obravnava vprašanja intersubjektivnosti in družbenega sveta kot relacijske oziroma odnosne sfere. Na koncu se osredotoči na prakse družbenih gibanj ter vprašanja reprodukcije in transformacije družbenih konvencij in normativnih predpostavk.

Ključne besede: *biografsko raziskovanje, sociografičnost, biografičnost, tranzicijsko učenje, družbena gibanja, emancipatorna praksa*

In light of the current far-reaching developments in a world on the move, questions of democratisation, solidarity, dignity, the equitable distribution of resources, living and educational opportunities are gaining major importance for stabilising societies. In this context, social problems which appear in societies due to dramatic changes and grave social disparities are not only seen as individual problems but are also framed as supra-individual challenges which call for the creation of collective modes of coping and learning. Social movements in particular are considered to have emancipatory and innovative potential for societies and for the processes of social change. Against this backdrop, this paper will focus on civil learning, emancipatory practices and the processes of social change. The starting point is how to theorise learning processes layered on the supra-individual level and which are related to communities and societies. In this regard, the text explores the social world as a relational sphere that arises among social actors and will turn particular attention to the interplay between individual and collective modes of learning. The author argues in this context that theories dealing with the dialectical relationship between structures and subjects somewhat overlook both the relevance collective modes of learning have for social change processes, and the opportunities that civil spheres and new learning environments offer a learning society. Moreover, it is argued that theoretical assumptions surrounding the mapping of the interplay between social structure and subjects neglect the relevance of intersubjectivity and overemphasise either the structural or the individual perspective in the processes of sociation.

To this end, the author has been conceptualising a theoretical tool which allows mapping processes for 'rewriting sociality' and its relation to biographical and societal learning. The paper will specifically highlight the capacity of social actors, groups and communities to critically reflect on shared circumstances and the question of how these spaces of living together are created and constructed. These reflections involve questioning established social relationships, inherent power regimes and the impact these power-structured relations have on individuals, social groups and societies. The processes of rewriting sociality are considered to be a result of highly reflexive forms of learning and are linked with the assumption that we experience the social spheres that arise between us as shapeable through complex reflection on our socially interrelated lives. In this regard, sociographicity will be introduced as a draft concept[1]. This theoretical tool is still a work in

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1   The early stages of the draft concept have been discussed with Fergal Finnegan (Maynooth University, Ireland) in the context of a joint paper presentation at the ESREA Conference of the Life History and Biography

progress and draws on empirical research into social movements, emancipatory practices and social change processes carried out by the author (e.g. in the highlands of Chiapas in Mexico). The paper will review "biographicity" (Alheit and Dausien, 2000) as a rich and generative concept for comprehending social change processes which are layered on the specific interface of biography and society. The basic assumptions of biographicity are relevant for understanding the processes of rewriting sociality. The limits of highlighting collective formations and supra-individual modes of learning will be discussed in this context. By introducing sociographicity as a draft concept, the paper also deals with questions of intersubjectivity and the relatedness of social spheres. Finally, the paper will focus on some aspects of social movement practices which seem to be relevant for conceptualising sociographicity, highlighting questions on the reproduction and transformation of social conventions and normative assumptions on a collective level.

BIOGRAPHICITY AND TRANSITIONAL LEARNING

Biographical learning[2] is experience-based and situated in one's lifeworld, and "learning worlds are embedded within historically rooted, interactive and biographically 'produced' lifeworlds" (Alheit and Dausien, 2002, p. 16). The biographicisation of social experiences draws on the assumption that we have the capacity to "reflexively 'organise' experiences" in a way that generates personal coherence and a "communicable, socially viable lifeworld perspective for guiding actions" (Alheit, 2005, p. 209). In this context, Alheit and Dausien (2002, p. 16) emphasise the emergence of an "individual logic" through a "specific, biographically layered structure of experience". Highlighting the interplay between subjects and social environments, they argue that biographical construction processes function as a creative system that responds to external influences with an "inner logic" and translate external impulses and perturbations into the "language of experiences". Coping with external requirements is thus understood as an "intaking" rather than "inputting" process (Alheit and Dausien, 2000, p. 412). In this regard, the development of an "appropriation system" is part of the discussion which involves the "formation of supra-ordinated, generative structures of action and knowledge" (Alheit and Dausien, 2002, p. 15). By doing so, individuals produce more sense structures related to themselves and their social framework (see Bude, 1984). This assumes that learning is not determined by the formation of biographical supra-ordinated structures but is thought to be an open structure "that has to integrate the new experience it gains through interacting with the world, with others and with itself" (Alheit and Dausien, 2002, p. 16). Additionally, "biographical background knowledge" (Alheit, 2005, p. 209) can be changed through learning (see Alheit, 1993; Alheit and Hoerning, 1989). In situations where "we find ourselves stumbling" or "we

2   What I have to leave open at this point is the relevance of embodied and emotional aspects in learning and transformation processes.

feel as if the ground is slipping away from beneath our feet" (Alheit and Dausien, 2002, p. 15) large parts of our pre-reflexive knowledge enter our awareness and can be processed explicitly. Moreover, biography involves hidden sense resources, such as the sizeable potential of "unlived life" (Weizsäcker, 1956). A far-reaching aspect is the assumption that transitional learning processes deal with social structures in a different way: they are interpreted as elements of new contextual conditions (see Kokemohr, 1989; Marotzki, 1990). Thus, not only biographical knowledge can be changed but the "structures of the entire landscape in which we find ourselves" as well (Alheit and Dausien, 2002, p. 15). Biographical background knowledge functions as an "emergent potential for changing [social] structures" (Alheit, 2005, p. 209). Given this, biographicity can be described as an "inner potential" for coping with current social realities, as a capacity for integrating new experiences and impressions with already established knowledge, and for modifying biographical knowledge in a way that gives us a basic feeling of continuity and coherence in spite of ambivalences and contradictions (see Alheit, 1994, p. 45).

There is a common understanding that learning is an interactive process which is socially mediated and structured, and that we have the capacity to experience ourselves as being socially related and contextualised. Dausien (1996), for example, describes these aspects as a form of "practical sociality" (p. 576) which has major importance in biographical processes of self-affirmation. Social circumstances are seen as fields of interaction which gain relevance for the mediation of individual and collective sense figurations. Alheit and Dausien (2000) emphasize that biographicity is a resource opening up possibilities for building new patterns of social involvement (see p. 418). In relation to the biographicity of social experience, they also suggest that learning and *Bildung* evoke the (biographical) formation of collective processes, such as social networks, collective knowledge and common practices (see Alheit and Dausien, 2002), but without giving insights into how these processes might be formed.

If we focus on the limits of the biographical research approach, Dausien and Kelle (2005) refer to an "individualising bias" within biographical analysis (p. 208). Furthermore, Dausien (1996) has criticised the assumption of an independent social self (such as Kohli's (1988) conception of a modern biographical format) as an androcentric perspective on modern life histories. The limits become especially apparent when dealing with the social embeddedness of subjects and their biographies, the practice of 'doing biography', and in general terms, with the intersubjectivity of life histories. The formation of collective processes, the emergence of collective agency as well as collective learning processes might not be highlighted sufficiently and can leave open questions, for example, how these processes in particular are shaped and what influence they have on social structures and social change. In my research on learning dispositions in confrontation with social inequality in Chiapas (see Pilch Ortega, 2018), I additionally criticised the Eurocentric perspective within biographical analysis; a high we-orientation within narratives is mostly interpreted as a premodern phenomenon (even though they are explicitly characterised by reflexivity) and not recognised as a mode of subjectivity (as a self-view

and a world-view) which has been formed as a legitimate response to current challenges. It must be noted that social embeddedness remains an important factor in this region. The shortcomings of social welfare in many areas, for instance, support for the elderly, induces a higher level of social interdependency. A collective orientation can be understood as the principal condition for the survival of social actors. In my research, different patterns of social referencing were important in understanding how people deal with experiences of social inequality and how they frame it. In this context, belonging to a social group and the corresponding we-perspective is an important aspect within biographical narratives. These kinds of patterns of social referencing create an affinity for specific types of social cooperation which function as an important resource for creating social agency. Accordingly, different modes of learning such as biographical learning, community learning and societal learning appear as highly intertwined within the narratives (see Pilch Ortega, 2016). This particular structure of learning dispositions layered on a supra-individual level as well as the 'resistance' of the empirical data to individual modes of theorising provided important impulses for developing sociographicity as a draft concept, which will be introduced next.

SOCIOGRAPHICITY AS THE CAPACITY FOR REWRITING SOCIALITY

Going beyond individual biographical horizons, learning also appears to be something which is situated on a supra-individual level. Current social issues are not only framed as individual problems but are seen as supra-individual challenges that are relevant for society and for social learning processes. Focusing on social dynamics, inequality can also be structured and framed as a collective experience, likewise experiences of liberation. Dealing with such experiences collectively also enables subjects and groups to question seemingly naturalised social relationships and inherent power regimes. They reflect the impact of these power-structured relations for individuals as well as for social groups and societies, and thus society starts to be framed as something that has the capacity to learn. In this regard, I want to introduce the idea of sociographicity as a draft concept to explain such critical reflection processes on society and to map the practice of rethinking and rewriting sociality within the interwovenness of biographical learning, community learning and societal learning.

Constructed in a comparable way to the term 'biography' ('bios' meaning life and 'graphein' writing), the prefix 'socio' refers to social relations among members of a society or societies and the suffix 'graphicity' deals with re-writing or re-shaping sociality. According to the concept of biographicity, the idea of 'graphicity' includes the assumption that we have the capacity to reinterpret our socially related life in the social circumstances within which we experience it, and to experience social contexts and relations as 'shapeable'. In comparison to biographicity, the focus lies more on the supra-individual level, on social relations and dynamics, as well as on how the spaces we live in together are created and constructed with respect to equality, dignity, social recognition, living and educational opportunities, etc. Against this backdrop, sociographicity can be

described as the capacity individuals and groups have to critically reflect on sociality, on social and power relations, and to experience social spaces and relations as shapeable. Rewriting sociality refers to complex and intersubjective reflection processes, which may lead to the creation of new patterns of interpretation as a 'product' of highly reflexive forms of learning focused on sociality. Transformed toward imagining the social world and its relations, these perspectives accompany new emergent practices. Through transitional learning, societal structures are interpreted and experienced as new contextual conditions. Rewriting sociality includes shaping the social future by reinterpreting the social past as well. The social future is thereby understood as being something shared. To understand the processes of rewriting sociality as an emancipatory practice, it seems relevant to focus on the interrelatedness of social spheres and the processual and contextual character of such processes. Various theoretical assumptions will be briefly highlighted below.

As previously mentioned, intersubjectivity plays a central role in sociographicity as well as in biographicity. Intersubjectivity seems to also be relevant for the question of where the generative structures or mechanisms lie when focusing on the processes of sociation. In general terms, intersubjectivity refers to the idea of the mutual relatedness of all beings. Mead's conception of intersubjectivity focuses on communicative relations between subjects. These relations can also be understood as a societal regime in which individuals are not isolated or atomised entities who take up a subordinated role within collectives but are conceived as 'arguing' participants focusing on a shared world (see Joas, 1980, p. 19). From this perspective, subjectivity can only be experienced through the responses of others. The concept of responsivity (Waldenfels, 2007) also underlines the assumption of responsive relations as the fundamental basis of human relationships to their social worlds. Finding creative answers to the desires of others creates moments of freedom, but mutual relatedness continues to be essential. Rosa (2016) focuses on the question of how we experience ourselves as situated in the world and related to others. In his analysis, he highlights world- and self-references as resonance relations characterized by qualitatively different modes of interaction with the world. Late modern societies damage basic resonance relations (his critique) and provoke a phenomenon which he labels "social alienation". Foregrounding the relational character of the social, Crossley (2011) argues that the social world has to be viewed as "a *process* [which is] arising *between* social actors" (p. 21). Actors are therefore "always agents-in-relation" (ibid., p. 2), underlining the fact that agency is a relational rather than an individual phenomenon. Hence society is not seen as a social thing (i.e. as an entity) "but rather a state of play within a vast web of ongoing interactions" (ibid., p. 13). In a similar vein, Elias (1976; 2010; Elias and Scotson, 2008) offers a relational view on social reality with his theory of figuration and his intention to overcome structural functionalism as well as methodological individualism. Figurations are understood as interdependent and mutually influencing webs of social relations which vary in their form and complexity. Even though historically rooted and socially produced, figurations are constantly in progress, fluid, and characterised by changing patterns of social relatedness. Insofar as figurations emerge through social

interaction, social actors have specific figuration experiences as well as reproduce and also transform the structures of interdependency and inherent social relationship regimes.

If we focus on biographical construction processes, it can be argued that the way in which we typically interact with others and experience ourselves as being socially related refers to long-term learning processes. These can be framed as a formation of "biographical relationship schemata" (Schütze, 1981) which are part of one's habitual orientation. Different types of social interaction are implicitly favoured while others are rejected or not even considered. With respect to transitional learning, not only can social bonds and relationships be challenged, but the way in which we typically interact with others, and the modality through which we experience ourselves in relation to others can be fundamentally transformed as well. This seems to be an important aspect of the practices of rewriting sociality. To a great extent, modes of social relation are reproduced by implicit knowledge structures on which individuals rely intuitively in their daily life. If such patterns enter our awareness, typical modes of social interacting and contextualising can be transformed and impact the typical patterns of figuration. Another relevant aspect is the interactive character of sense-making processes. By interacting with others, perspectives and structures of relevance are synchronised and stabilised, but also challenged. Intersubjectivity plays an important role in the negotiation of meanings and the capacity to interconnect new perspectives with sense figurations. In this regard, finding a common or shared 'language' and understanding is fundamental in order to allow for the transfer of ideas and perceptions. These processes are also essential for building a shared world. As Merleau-Ponty (1962) puts it:

> "In the experience of dialogue there is constituted between the other person and myself a common ground; my thought and his are interwoven into a single fabric […] and they are inserted into a shared operation of which neither of us is the creator. We have here a dual being, where the other is for me no longer a mere bit of behavior in my transcendental field, […] we co-exist through a common world" (p. 354).

Referring to Berger and Luckman, Marotzki (1990) emphasises the emergence of the "structures of plausibility" on the basis of communication. In relation to transformation processes, plausibility also functions as an important tool for stabilising new perspectives[3]. In summary, it can be noted that sociographicity draws on the assumption that humans have the capacity to reflect on their socially related life and to rewrite this interactively produced interdependent sphere. Patterns of social referencing are characterised according to an 'inner logic' and structured according to biographical dispositions. Social relations and typical modes of interacting are largely reproduced by implicit knowledge structures, but if such typical modes enter our awareness, possibilities for transformation

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3   Marotzki's considerations are related to Fritz Schütze's conception of the trajectories of transformation and the trajectories of suffering.

become available. The following section will highlight the processes of reproduction and transformation on the supra-individual level; in connection to this, some examples of social movement practices will also be given.

SOCIETAL LEARNING AND EMANCIPATORY PRACTICE: QUESTIONS OF REPRODUCTION AND TRANSFORMATION

Focusing on the relationship between individuals and society, the meso-level, such as civil public spheres and new learning environments, can be seen as something which offers opportunities for a learning society. Smelser (1997) describes the meso-level as "the heart and the soul of our civil society" and he emphasises that "if we do not keep our eye on the meso level, we are likely to ignore the most problematic feature of society of the coming decades" (p. 48). The structures of societal organisation are "in large part 'imagined', much as societies themselves are 'imagined communities'" (Anderson, 1983, p. 46). The meso-level as a space of interaction can be seen as an important intermediary sphere, as a civil bargaining space between "macro-structures and the biographical micro-world, two spheres that are drifting further and further apart" (Alheit, 1999, p. 79). The concept of a learning society (even if not divorced from the political) focuses primarily on the civil public. Alheit (ibid.) mentions in this regard that the "legitimation for a learning society in this sense derives from the collapse of systemic integration and social integration" (p. 80).

If we focus on the transformation processes of social structures, the question of how to break the circle of reproduction must be highlighted. In this regard, Bourdieu describes social crises as "periods in which habitus fall out of alignment with the fields in which they operate, creating a situation in which 'belief in the game' (*illusio*) is temporarily suspended and doxic assumptions are raised to the level of discourse, where they can be contested" (Crossley, 2003, p. 44). Bourdieu argues that the sphere of consciously raised issues in a society is just the "tip of an iceberg" and that the "unspoken and pre-reflective or 'doxic' assumptions", as the broader and much deeper part, support the reproduction of societal structures (ibid, p. 46). In periods of social crises, such doxic beliefs enter our awareness and are generally questioned; the dissonance or misfit of subjective expectations and objective possibilities destroys self-evidence in a practical way (see Bourdieu, 1977, p. 169) and this opens up possibilities for critique and social protest:

> "It is part of how society reproduces itself. But there is also change. Conflict is built into society. People can find that their expectations and ways of living are suddenly out of step with the new social positions they find themselves in. […] Then questions of social agency and political intervention become very important" (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 19).

In this context, Crossley (2003) criticises Bourdieu's theory of social crisis and his explanations of the emergence of social protest because they tend to overemphasise the temporal character of such phenomena and neglect the durability of social movements

in current societies. He argues that during periods of social crisis, and also in situations of social stability, certain parts of habitual orientation are questioned. He does follow Bourdieu's assumption that during social crisis, "critical attitudes take shape in relation to issues which increasingly matter to citizens, to the point where they will fight for them" (ibid., p. 48). The difference he sees is in the allocation of issues in periods of crisis. Doxic beliefs enter people's awareness and are foregrounded while previous assumptions and relevancies might become doxic or are dropped from public consciousness.

Social movements can be seen as an active and open-ended intervention to influence social structures (see Fuchs, 1999). Social mobilization appears as a strategy to expand influence and relatedly the power of transformation. Waves of social protest disturb public discourses and power regimes. In this regard, 'diagnostic and prognostic framing' can be seen as an innovative performance which social movements incorporate into public awareness. The power of social problems being represented by the affected individuals also involves a struggle for power in terms of definition and perspective. Social movements as reflexive learning environments deal with such doxic assumptions by foregrounding issues, and also create new perspectives by reinterpreting social relations and dynamics. Such newly generated perspectives and issues need to be translated and transferred into public discourses. This capacity of social movements gains relevance in their attempts to influence social dynamics. If issues and concerns do not receive any response from society, social mobilization processes are slowed or even grind to a halt. The rules of this power-structured process and the legitimation of media form part of a negotiation[4]. In this way, emancipatory knowledge and knowledge of collective agency are accumulated, and these resources are seen as providing a collective benefit (see Pilch Ortega, 2018).

The creation of a self-image or rather of self-understanding as a group or movement is also meaningful in order to gain recognition and to be 'taken seriously' as a collective actor. The interactively generated perspective does not represent a homogeneous understanding; rather, it represents the social reality that emerges in such a way (as a product of socially mediated perceptions), and it can be understood as individual cross-linked views focused on some common ground. According to the development of an individual biographical 'experience code', the emergence of a shared 'value climate' within the collective can be assumed. Additionally, I would argue that civil society learning environments function as an experimental field for differently imagined modes of social interaction which try to give relevance to questions of equal participation, emancipation and democratisation. These practices are also part of reflections in terms of experienced learning. Such circumstances and learning environments may offer a different quality of social recognition for the participants than, for example, neoliberally oriented systems. Another emancipatory practice focuses on the production of collective memory. The interpretation of a collective past has a strong influence on current social practices as well

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4   Here I refer to struggles for symbolic power (e.g. Bourdieu, 1985), struggles for recognition (Honneth, 1992) and struggles for difference (Fuchs, 1999), which also involve the question of the power of representation and definition.

as on the imagination of future possibilities. 'Memory framing' can be understood as a tool for influencing collective memory which seeks to give force to alternative perspectives of the past, the present and the future. As an emancipatory practice, it foregrounds the struggle to establish the meaning of historical events and their consequences as well as current problems and conflicts (see Pilch Ortega, 2018). In this context, the sizeable potential of "unlived life" (Weizsäcker, 1956) has to be regarded as an aspect which goes beyond individual life histories.

Several studies in this field show that engagement in social movement activities has a politicizing effect on those who participate and creates dispositions that may lead to further political action and protest activity. Crossley (2003) suggests the emergence of a critical habitus in this context. The public sphere by itself has to be perceived as a multiple, competing and conflicting field of interaction where different collective actors are involved. The diverse social arenas are characterised by different dynamics, field logics and power regimes.

SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

Social structures and relations are constantly changing and in progress (see Crossley, 2003, p. 44). It could be argued that postmodern societies are characterised by a permanent crisis; hence ideas of social harmony are partially suspended and normative assumptions are constantly in question. This brings us to a situation that we as members of societies have to deal with – the doxic assumptions and pre-reflexive knowledge on which we rely in our daily life reproducing the status quo of social regimes. This in turn creates opportunities for breaking the circle of reproduction and for moments of critical reflection, which may lead to emancipatory practices and social protest. Sociographicity as a draft concept tries to map such processes of rewriting sociality. We interact with others and create the social world which arises among us. To a large extent, social relationship regimes are reproduced by implicit knowledge structures. By making specific figuration experiences, we also transform figuration patterns through critical reflections on a shared world.

If we focus on the scope of sociographicity, it can be mentioned that reflections on sociality also involve questioning current assumptions about the relations between humans and nature, including animals (as we can see on the basis of ecological movements). Additionally, aspects of space and time have to be included when thinking about the processes of sociation. As was already mentioned, the concept of sociographicity is still a work in progress. In this context, I want to emphasise that the practice of rewriting sociality consequently has to be conceived as an ongoing process which is relational, interdependent and contextualized. This has ramifications for the question of how to theorize emancipatory practices and agency in order to prevent a Eurocentric perspective on emancipation as well as tendencies to overemphasise agency as an individual phenomenon, and to rethink the collective as a figuration structure which is constantly progressing.

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