

Ethnographies of the Contemporary – Perspectives and Positions on an Anthropology of the Political

Institutskolloquium, Institut für Europäische Ethnologie, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin
Wintersemester 2018/19

**Tuesdays 2-4pm
Hausvogteiplatz 5-7, Room 0007**

concept note

How can we make sense of the political moment we are currently traversing? “The end of liberal democracy”, “refugee crisis”, “fortress Europe” and “impending state failure” are just some of the currently circulating, prominent catch words that point to how the foundations and basic terms of political life and societal self-understanding are in a process of transformation, even disappearance. These developments pose challenges not only to the political establishment, but also to our analytical concepts and approaches.

This lecture series centres on the following questions: What conceptual and methodological equipment can contemporary anthropology offer to analytically dissect the present political moment? What is the potential of distinguishing ‘politics’ from ‘the political’ for both disciplinary concept formation and ethnographic research? And can precisely an ethnographic approach successfully take into account the blind spots of hegemonic debates, alternative political histories and visions of the future, or the everyday life and practices of those ‘without names’ as constitutive elements of the political?

By asking these questions, we are also engaging with interdisciplinary debates that have discussed ‘the political’ as a form-giving foundational dimension of the social (Marchart 2010). The political can thus be understood as an elementary field, out of which politics as an institutional location for the exercise of power and the regulation of conflicts emerges, but which retains the potential for radically different conceptions and arrangements of living together. In the moments when the regularity of social life becomes fragile and routine, administrative procedures reach an impasse – as in the context of unexpected events, frictions, crises or revolutions – the political comes to the fore and becomes empirically palpable.

Different theoretical perspectives intersect in these debates and are repositioned in relation to each other. We might differentiate between an ‘associative’ and a ‘dissociative’ tradition (Marchart 2010). The first school of thought conceives of the political as an (intermediary) space of freedom, assembly and public deliberation, emerging from social interaction. The second perspective emphasises primordial antagonisms, erratic effects of power and social struggles as elementary principles of the political.

The colloquium will provide a space to bring into dialogue various conceptions of the political – as developed, for instance, by Hannah Arendt, Alain Badiou, Chantal Mouffe, Judith Butler or Bruno Latour – and to discuss their usefulness in relation to contemporary anthropological problems and questions. Of particular interest here are the ethnographic potentials that arise from a respective focus on the political. The papers will enquire into this nexus through conceptual interventions and research on humanitarian projects and border regimes, the political life of infrastructures and queer politics, migration movements and the current reconfigurations of Europe. Our aim is also to gauge the contemporary moment,

bereft, as it seems, of progressive utopias and visions of the future. In the context of conflicts, diverse social movements or the collective preoccupation with 'matters of concern' (Bruno Latour), the political comes to the fore ever more forcefully as a source of different forms of hoping and yearning, mobilisation and disillusion (Dzenovska & De Genova 2018).

References

Jens Adam & Asta Vonderau: (Hrsg.): *Formationen des Politischen. Anthropologie politischer Felder*. Bielefeld 2014.

Pierre Bourdieu: *Über den Staat. Vorlesungen am Collège de France 1989-1992*. Berlin 2014.

Dace Dzenovska & Nicholas De Genova: Introduction. *Desire for the political in the aftermath of the Cold War*. In: *Focaal. Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology* 80 (2018), pp. 1-15.

Bruno Latour: *From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik or How to Make Things Public*. In: Bruno Latour & Peter Weibel: *Making Things Public. Atmospheres of Democracy*. Cambridge 2005, pp. 4-31.

Oliver Marchart: *Die politische Differenz. Zum Denken des Politischen bei Nancy, Lefort, Badiou, Laclau und Agamben*. Berlin 2010.

Yael Navaro-Yashin: 'Life is dead here'. *Sensing the political in 'no man's land'*. In: *Anthropological Theory*, 3,1 (2003), pp. 107-125.

Johanna Rolshoven & Ingo Schneider (Hrsg.): *Dimensionen des Politischen. Ansprüche und Herausforderungen der Empirischen Kulturwissenschaften*. Berlin 2018.

concept and organization: Jens Adam & the research laboratories at the Institute for European Ethnology, HU Berlin,
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