

WS 07

Considering everyday imaginative practices in knowledge and reality construction

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Organisiert von / organized by:

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When the social negotiation of reality comes to a halt, and we no longer desire to learn from one another or prefer ignorance over knowledge, fields of non-knowledge inevitably come into being. In agreement with Wolfgang Iser (1974), we argue that humans react to these “Leerstellen” creatively, interpretatively and especially imaginatively. In place of socially negotiated knowledge creation; the fictive and the imaginative take precedent.

Despite various scholars acknowledging the centrality of imagination for human society (Durand 1960, Castoriadis 1975, Anderson 1983, Taylor 2004, Harris & Rapport 2015), an encompassing debate on imaginations’ roles in the production of knowledge or reaction to non-knowledge is still pending. ‘Imagination’ as a concept has been touched on through theories of innovation, suspicion, and doubt, but is often bound to positive or negative normative judgments. In this rather philosophical terrain, a perspective that focuses on common practices of imagination has been largely neglected.

Therefore, we suggest considering imagination outside spectacular expressions in the media, art, conspiracy theories or religious contexts and instead invite papers that engage with everyday forms of imagination. We encourage addressing questions of how imaginations relate to self-assurance, to identity politics, to moral and ethical positioning; we encourage exploring imaginations’ roles in the interpretation of political, economic, and social contexts and to ask where they could serve in developing alternative conceptions of reality. By discussing ordinary peoples’ imagination we aim to address how the (re)production of imagination is organized, perceived and interpreted by different actors and how to conceptualize the relation of individual and collective imaginations. Does an end of negotiations also mean an end to culturally specific imaginaries or can imaginations even stimulate new forms of collective knowledge exchange?

Vortragende / Speakers:

Stéphane Voell (Philipps Universität, Marburg)

Legal imaginaries of traditional law

In order to grasp the full dimension of traditional legal practices I introduce the concept of “legal imaginary”. Imaginaries are “socially transmitted representational assemblages that interact with people’s personal imaginings and are used as meaning-making and world-shaping devices” (Salazar 2012). Traditional law is frequently found in descriptions of the Balkans and the Caucasus. During my research, I was confronted, however, by a curious phenomenon: on the one hand, it was possible to describe few processes that one could conceive as traditional law. Nevertheless, these practices were rare as the social structure producing it are vanishing. On the other hand, there appears to be a lot of talk on traditional law. Local actors speak of it like a religious good; they refer to traditional law in self-portrayals, stereotypes, ethnographies, etc. In other words, there are many people speaking on traditional law, but not so many practicing it. I suggest not speaking of “traditional law”, but of traditional “legal imaginaries”. I will discuss in my presentation that both – narratives on traditional law and its sporadic practice – are part of these imaginaries.

Edda Heyken (FU Berlin)

Imaginations, silences, and embodied knowledge

Negotiating a painful past as part of social reality poses an emotional and cognitive challenge to individuals as it is associated with vulnerability. This paper examines the role of silence in a diasporic Vietnamese community responding to a discursive gap with imagined and implicit forms of knowledge and reality production. Several anthropologists have argued that silence reflects a presence rather than an absence, is opaque, powerful, and forms a strategical element of communication (Dwyer 2009, Weller 2017, Kidron 2009). Without negotiations, the constructed reality is fragile and tends to challenge self-assurance. Superficially, this silence seems to be consensual but it contains different narratives and tensions. Findings from a person-centered ethnographic study indicate that embodied practices produce a web that silently ensures belonging and provides an approach to interpreting social reality. The circulation of person-object interaction can promote the understanding of felt intensities across words and distances, which, eventually, could form the basis for a cross-generational discourse.

Christian Buchner (Universität Hamburg)

Deep tropes from the outer rims? Utopian imaginary work in South Siberian half-public settings

Studying everyday cultures in urban Russia, a strikingly long tradition of non-negotiabilities and non-participative discourse is undeniable. Soviet formalized political ideology set a collective socialist future above individual interest; poverty and street violence in the 1990ies, as well as solidifying oligarchic half-criminal political elite in the 2000s frustrated common political engagement. This resulted in staged participation and a public discourse emptied of meaning, orientation and relevance, earning peoples disregard. It left the formalized public space of the city associated widely negative as boring, dangerous, deceptive. However, exactly this formal non-negotiability has in part enabled and enables still an astonishing number of informal utopian half-public imaginaries detaching and deterritorializing from negatively perceived daily grind. Imaginative referential work and dense transgressive performances still play a central part in creating deep and meaningful socio-cultural settings, with attached solidarity groups, orientation, identity. That is as true for a commercial ski resort as for an island camp of yachtsman around Novosibirsk as 2016 field data reveals.

Michael Stasik (MPI Göttingen)

The migration-imagination complex:

Aventurisme among West African labour migrants in urban Ghana

This paper expands on the emic category of 'aventurisme' to examine how migration and imagination intersect in the life trajectories of West African labour migrants in urban Ghana. Designating a perilous path of social becoming by way of individual outward movement, the migrants' aventurisme relates to an imaginary practice that casts uncertainty as a resource to be explored, endured and exploited for aspirational self-making. Driven by expectations about possible outcomes of their journeys, these imaginaries, far from being idealized fantasies, are drawn on as a measure for evaluating present experiences, actions and hardships. Folding together the actual and possible of migratory mobility, the imaginative affordances of aventurisme shape feelings of frustration with a perceived lack of progress, and they support the moral capacity to persevere in spite of economic predicaments, often for many years on end. The focus on the affective and moral implications of the imagination, I suggest, contributes to a more complex understanding of migration beyond objectivist 'push and pull factors', and it offers a nuanced reflection on the negotiations of migratory success and failure.