



Heroism

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1. Definition

The SFB 948 relies on the processes of [heroization](#) as a basis for focusing on the interaction between [heroic figures](#) and the communities that create or appropriate them and that orientate themselves towards heroic models. We define a community's orientation towards heroic models as 'heroism'.^[1] Unlike the everyday and, often, also the academic usage of the term, our definition does not describe the sphere of the heroic in general or the exaggeration of heroic forms. Instead, we understand heroism as a heuristic term describing a conventional system of what Pierre Bourdieu calls "internalised patterns"^[2] with heroic connotations. By understanding heroism as a "socialised subjectivity"^[3], we are able to relate it to Bourdieu's concept of the habitus.

Heroisms point to the process through which individuals and/or collectives (usually in the contexts of certain social classes, or distinct political, religious and intellectual movements) acquire self-assurance by imitating and appropriating heroic actions and behaviours. Even discursive patterns, i.e. forms of expression and topoi, rhetoric and narratives, can develop into heroisms. By analyzing different kinds of heroic self-fashioning, it is possible to interpret certain gender roles or public presentations of rulers and elites as an *imitatio heroica* that serves as a marker of social distinction. In the history of Europe since antiquity, certain heroisms have defined the self-understanding, self-portrayal, and imagination of social groups – especially those in power – sometimes in distinction from each other, sometimes in reference to one another. The orientation towards heroes as human models is extremely important for the formation of heroisms as habitus patterns; individuals essentially acquire their habitus via imitation. A prerequisite of this is an object of imitation, be it imaginary, physically present or represented by media. In the case of heroes, the human form, as an object of imitation, is

fundamental.

2. Overview of research and future perspectives

Research has focused primarily on heroic figures as 'individuals', while the fundamental phenomena of heroization and heroism have received much less attention. This is perhaps due to a lack of clarity around the term 'heroism' itself. The phenomenon of heroism has thus far been little studied (Huizinga 1936/1948; Faber 1991/92; Faber 1993; cf. also Frevert 1998; Makolkin 2001)[4], aside from several works by Carlyle's successors (e.g. Bloomhardt 1941; Hook 1943; Campbell 1949; Jung 1985)[5], as well as studies on heroism in certain epochs such as the early modern period (Disselkamp 2002)[6] or the 18th/19th century (Jackson 1989; Jesse/Michalka 2006; Putzell/Leonard 1982; Abensour 1989; Plett 2002; Smith 2008, van Marwyck 2010).[7] More recently, Herfried Münkler outlined developments and schisms in the transformation from heroic to post-heroic societies (Münkler 2006; 2007).[8] His research, following Huizinga's definition of heroism, posits that post-heroic societies are characterised by the disappearing consciousness of the necessity to use all available forces for a collective task (up to self-sacrifice), which Münkler considers a distinctive feature of heroic societies. In this view, heroism appears closely related to war and (self-)sacrifice, as is certainly the case when one looks at modernity from the perspective of the national conflicts of the 19th century. However, this contradicts the idea of heroic concepts and constructions that are constantly being adapted to current needs. Münkler's theses on the close connection between the heroic and the religious, its high mobilisation potential of young people and the strong link between political participation rights and military service in heroic societies can provide points of reference for further studies on the history of heroism. But it remains to be seen whether his emphasis on warlike and violent heroism can be transferred to other societies historically, accounting also for older cultural and social processes since antiquity. Münkler's work fails to consider the communication and appropriation of an heroic habitus within these societies, their processes of change and their social and political conditions. Such questions would shift the focus from the structural to the cultural and pragmatic level. The current resurgence of heroic discourse within society is precisely what encourages such questions.

3. References

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- 2 Bourdieu, Pierre: "Der Habitus als Vermittlung zwischen Struktur und Praxis". In: Bourdieu, Pierre: Zur Soziologie der symbolischen Formen. Frankfurt a. M. 1974: Suhrkamp, 125-158, 143.

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