

## **Practices of self-making between estates and societal dynamics.**

**CvO University of Oldenburg, GK 1608 / 1 Self-making. Practices of subjectivation in historical and interdisciplinary perspective, Institute of History, Prof. Dr. Dagmar Freist (Early Modern History)**

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Early Modern Studies have long been confronted with a dilemma of the system of estates (*Ständeordnung*) as a model for Early Modern Society: Normatively valid until the early 19th century, the system of estates appears incommensurate to describe, analyze, or explain the social dynamics since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Even contemporaries operated with different meanings and models of this system when trying to integrate newly evolving social groups. Consequently, more recent research tends to problematize if not to question altogether the model as a general shaping power for this era. In doing so, the self-positioning of historical actors within the order of the caste society are largely disregarded or simply ignored. The query for a new understanding of the feudal order under consideration of the societal dynamics frames the subtext of the following reflections on the practices of self-making at the beginning of modernity. This will constitute the core of the conference.

With reference to action- or system-theoretical approaches, historical as well as sociological research stress the relevance of the relationship between structures and subjects for social differentiation. Departing from these approaches, the conference aims at the practices of self-making. It is to be tested whether this praxeological perspective offers a new understanding of social relations and the attribution of positions in specific fields. The starting point for all praxeological considerations is not one certain "actor" or "subject" with its intentional operations. Instead, the subject-formation as a process becomes the center. Following practice theory approaches from sociology and cultural studies, social life is understood as a network of closely linked practices in which subjects are formed. While cognitive knowledge about the world and worldly things is less important in this context, questions focus on how thinking and knowledge are produced and implemented by (performing) practices.

Cultural patterns and codes are encoded in practices which then enter into routinized attributions and interpretations of players in their actions.

Tacit knowledge and connoisseurship in each specific context set practices in motion relying on a familiar repertoire.

The techniques of the self brought forth by the players are not to be understood in the classical sense as intentional acts, but as expressions of social practices. These comprise knowledge of things that were considered expected behaviour as well as dispositions, and cultural codes.

Patterns of evaluations and perception, schemes of action, habits (in the sense of "habitus") and lifestyle are internalized and form as practices the cultural code of communication within a field. In this perspective, individual actions are part of collective action structures and common social practices.

In his theory, Pierre Bourdieu stressed the importance of habitus as a structured and structuring structure for the formation of social fields. However, the question of the formation or origin of a habitus, the forms of subjects and their practices remain unanswered.

Furthermore, Bourdieu does not offer an explanation for the emergence of new social (sub)spaces or fields. These societal dynamics particularly question the rigid order of estates in the early modern period.

Linking the habitus to its conditions of existence does not allow a field's decomposition by "habitus metamorphosis". But the very social processes of differentiation in the early modern period demand explanations for the emergence of new social subspaces. These are created by actors working on themselves, using techniques of the self (Michel Foucault), self-

questioning themselves and designing their self-images, consequently exceeding the limits of caste society.

This tendency to self-theming and self-modeling is reflected in a variety of different sources, such as portraits and costume books, autobiographical works, decency books, medical guides, court files, and fashion magazines.

Artifacts such as clothing, accessories, furniture, and room arrangements are part of the self-making processes, as well as embodied practices like gestures, posture, and facial expressions. Many of these sources, illustrate a high degree of relational self-reflection and physical eloquence, and also include instructions dedicated to the training of certain practices, intending to incorporate them as second nature.

Yet, field-specific rather than estate-related forms of taste and appropriate behavior surfaced even before this medialization under the influence of proto-globalization, the redistribution of resources within the civil society and estate-independent access to luxury goods. At the same time the professionalization of certain occupational groups such as scholars, doctors, businessmen and entrepreneurs led to complex processes of self-authorization, which in turn made use of very different forms of distinction.

## **Section I**

### **Doctors, scholars, officials: practices of self-making and societal fields**

In this section, the reproduction, transformation, and subversion of societal fields will be examined. From the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards, several emerging professions such as entrepreneurs and merchant families, physicians, scholars and journalists developed and formed new urban elites. These formations stood in striking contradiction to the estates and thus challenged traditional order. In developing a specific habitus, self-concept and self-image, these social groups were to crystallize along existing subject positions of the social field into new recognizable subject-forms.

Previous research in early modern history marked these self-making processes as new forms of representation e.g. as the mercantile class. Taking on the praxeological perspective, this section aims at processes and mechanisms beneath these visualized projections of the self.

The examination of social practices of self-theming and self-positioning, their incorporation and modeling shed new light on intentional or unintentional adoption or alteration of images of the self and the process of subjectivation as new and independent subject forms such as doctor or scientist, "Sielrichter", midwife or officer.

At the same time, the section strives to come closer to a more complex understanding of the early modern society, which is understood as composed of relations between subjectpositions and the social positions of (new) actors.

## **Section II**

### **Nobles, citizens, and peasants: practices and social spaces in transition**

This section concentrates on practices and asks whether practices indicate a specific subject form and specific processes of subjectivation. The traditional estates of the early modern society lie at the center of attention. Social dynamics - emerging increasingly in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and thus challenging traditional privileges – provoked, if nothing else, diverse practices of distinction and self-assurance.

The question is whether the experience or attribution of "Unpassung" (non-fitting) and the pursuit of recognition produced social practices which then modeled and exceeded both subject forms and social spaces.

Social, economical, and political changes at the beginning of the early modern era such as professionalization and the spreading claim for “ennoblement through education” forced the challenged nobility to find new forms of legitimization and recognition. Coincidentally, nobility represented the social group that dealt intensely with forms of distinction through practices and physical eloquence (e.g. as Page of Honour at the Royal Court) and also in countless publications.

Migration in Northern Europe between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century challenged well-established and familiar subject forms and the constitution of social spaces. In this respect, the question of intercultural exchange, relationships and their influence on the (re)constitution of social spaces, the changes in thinking styles and habits acquire new importance.

### **SECTION III**

#### **Mothers, fathers and sons, converts: job profiles, education and the credible incarnation of subject forms**

While the previous sections investigated subject-forms minted by the system of estates or by processes of professionalization, contributions summoned in this section look at attempts of subjectivation which do not lie in accordance but somehow “crosswise” to those previously investigated: Mothers, fathers, daughters and sons, or converts are rarely exclusively “mother-“, “father-“, “daughter-“ or “son-subject”, “convert” or “not convert”. Therefore, this section will analyze the importance of recognition as a subject as well as the practices used by specific individuals to achieve a credible incarnation.

### **SECTION IV**

#### **Artifacts as participants of sociality**

In a sense, this section represents a cross section. From the perspective of empirical cultural studies and critical psychology, it emphasizes the significance of artifacts as participants of sociality.

In social practices various forces – texts, images, material and symbolic arrangements of e.g. town houses, churches, town halls, marketplaces – operate with disciplinary, normative and regulative effects on the physical behavior and on the inside of the actors, their perception and thinking, their judgments and feelings. Depending on their positions in their fields, their incorporated and embodied dispositions and their acquired personal resources (explicit knowledge and cognitive skills, ability to self-regulation, etc.), actors possess different technics in dealing with these forces. Furthermore, artefacts were explicitly employed to claim one’s position within a specific social field and to mark one’s (superior) relation to other actors.