Culture, Life and Critique

Workshop to be held at the Centre for Global Cooperation Research, University Duisburg-Essen

Tuesday 23 April, 15.15 - 18.30

Organizers:

David Chandler, Morgan Brigg, Christian Meyer, Frank Gadinger

Programme:

Session 1: Explaining the Turn from Culture as Limit to Culture as Resource (15.15 - 16.45)

In the social theorising of the 1970s and 1980s, classical liberal views of the subject were increasingly rejected and the lifeworld of culture and ideology was seen as a structural limit. This development was accompanied by both the failures of liberal universalism and the persistence, extension, and – for some – the celebration of difference. The view of cultural milieu as limit was expressed (in different ways) by the critical sociology of, e.g., Bourdieu and Althusser in terms of systemic closures and the constraints of autopoietic processes, practices and discourses from which embedded subjects could not escape but merely reproduce through their own agential choices. A similar view of culture as an endogenous process of difference creation was expressed in the apologia of neoliberal and new institutionalist economic theorising, for example, in the work of Douglass North.

Understandings of culturally-embedded subjects, emergent difference and autopoiesis persist today, but the milieu of life is increasingly understood not as a limit but as a resource for critical theorising. Life with its inchoate, constitutive and creative powers seems to be the driver of emancipatory possibilities – viz. our understandings of systems as open rather than closed, Boltanski’s critique of Bourdieu, Ranciere’s critique of Althusser, the post-Operaismo Marxism of Hardt and Negri, Latour’s Actor-Network Theory (ANT), Jordan’s Wild Systems Theory, the New Materialism of Connolly, Bennett and others, etc. How are we to understand and map this shift across a variety of disciplines? Is there an emancipatory and critical potential of materiality and life, and if so, how are we to grasp it? Is Life the New Left? And if so, how do we understand this transformation of the life world from limit and constraint to enabling resource?
Session 2: If Life is Critique what are the Normative Consequences for Academic Research and Policy Advice? (17.00 - 18.30)

Life and Power seem to have exchanged places. Today, life - the complex world - seems to always exceed power. In fact, power appears to be the limit or artificial constraint, continually failing to adequately constitute and realise itself, to command, to control or to know. If we do live in a world where unintended consequences, non-linear outcomes and side-effects are the norm rather than the exception (Merton, Beck, Giddens etc), where is the space either for government or for critique? If life/complexity/the world always exceeds power, is it possible to rule or govern at all, and is it possible to rule 'through' life rather than 'over' it? Is it still possible to posit neoliberal understandings of the progressive management of life - through facilitating, empowering, enabling, capacity-building (Sen etc) - or does this represent an outmoded and hubristic (neo-)liberal telos? If life can no longer be ruled over, is critique still possible or is 'giving voice' to the marginal, engaging in 'unscripted conversations' with the Other, and ANT accounting, the only form of 'critique'? If critique emerges from life itself, are critical academics and governments merely a barrier to emancipatory possibilities? How can the emancipatory and critical power of life and materiality be possibly employed against power and government, and if so, by whom? Alternatively, is there something problematic about the emergence of life as 'primary', and, if so, what is it? Are we talking of a new form of vitalism and if so, how does it relate to all the problems that we experienced with earlier forms (Nietzsche, etc.)?

Each session will be introduced briefly by 2 or 3 speakers and then we intend to have an open discussion. To facilitate this collective engagement we have suggested three readings which can form a backdrop to both the intellectual history of life/culture and critique and to the normative consequences of this. The readings are:


Following the workshop there will be a buffet and wine reception hosted by the Centre.