

CHALLENGING COLLECTIVITIES

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J. W. Goethe-University

Frankfurt am Main, Germany

CALL FOR PAPERS

In their political force as well as in the conditions of their constitution, collectivities entail essential ambivalences: processes of collectivization often carry totalizing tendencies with them or planish differences. At the same time, however, they possess emancipatory promise and transformative potential. Precisely because of its ambivalence, the concept of collectivity requires constant actualization and critical reflection. The ubiquity of collective phenomena warrants questioning well-established presuppositions and theories. To which constellations do we refer when we speak about collectivities? What are the forms of collectivity surrounding us today? Might concepts of collectivity and collective action-oriented political practice harbor diagnostic and emancipatory potential? Or does collectivity perforce imply serious problems and dangers?

The conference “Challenging Collectivities” raises such questions from an interdisciplinary perspective. Focusing on the role of collectivities, we want to theoretically reflect and empirically consider a wide range of contemporary phenomena. We are interested in developments such as contemporary social and political movements, the debate surrounding the so-called digital revolution associated with new forms of networking, the newly arising debate on the concept of life forms and their political or critical potentials, the relevance of a collective unconscious for the analysis of contemporary events, and discussions of global phenomena which invite us to reconsider collective formations – especially in regard to the concept of (maybe even non-human) agency. Thus, the conference engages questions concerning the conditions and forms of collective action, the social transformation that occurs in social and political movements in continuation of and/or against established models, and the manifestations of violence that occur in processes of collectivization

To approach these problems we suggest the following sub-topics. We welcome abstracts on these topics specifically or the general theme of the conference.

The Material of the Collective

How can we think the relation between subjects and collectives? Is a collective “the sum of all individuals”? Or do collectives have their own logic that always already transcends the sum of its parts? What – if anything – distinguishes collectives from society and social structures? Does it still make sense to talk about collectivity in times of the decentered subject? Recent debates (swarm theory, collective and artificial intelligence, Science and Technology Studies) raise questions about the material of the collective: Are non-human actants and matter impactful parts of collective phenomena? How can we (re-)conceptualize (collective) agency against this background? And: Does such a perspective constitute (political) opportunities or a variety of problems?

The Collectivity of Democracy

Democracy means collective self-determination. But who or what is this collective self? Must it be presupposed? Or is it lacking and should be created (in the future)? Does it exist as representation only? Or would a true democracy require it to be social reality? And what are the modalities of being- and/or acting-together that are (or should) be essential for a *demos*? Does collective will imply uniformity, consensus, or a reasonable aggregate in which the will of each individual is sublated? Is it therefore necessary to externally limit the collective will through individual rights in order to counter totalizing tendencies? Or is heterogeneity itself already the immanent and constitutive characteristic of a *demos*?

Law and Collectivity

The modern legal system claims to express a collective will. Moreover, by way of its reference to common law, it relies on collective practices as a pre-constitutional source. In statute law, however, the single law subject is the dominant category. How can one understand the relation between collectivity as the basis of legislation and individuation through law? Why can there be forms of collectivity in law (for example complicity in criminal law or even more complex forms of community law) whereas categories like property, accountability, or guilt are highly individualized and, in the current legal system, unimaginable as a collective category? What would a more collective mode of legal order mean?

Organization and Collectivity

Organizations – companies, associations, trade unions, universities etc. – are fundamental manifestations of collectivity. Conventionally, they are defined by clear affiliations, which are often highlighted by programs of identification, such as corporate identity-strategies. Against the background of digitalization and new opportunities of networking the question arises whether this drawing of boundaries and the dominant distinction between member/outsider are still timely for describing organizational processes. Which forms of organization are currently emerging beyond ‘classical’ organizations? How can one conceptualize the relation between institutions, organization, and protest? What forms of collectivities are organizations and what type of collectivity do they constitute?

Collective Action and Collective Agency

Who or what constitutes the possibility of collective action? Is there a reasonable way to distinguish collective action from collective agency? Is collective action antecedent to collectivity itself or does collectivity follow from collective action? Is there a specific form of collective action? Or are there rather many different forms of collective action, which are related to different life forms or discourses? And if so: What are the forms of collective action that enable action that transcends discourse and life forms?

Identity and Collectivity

Initiated especially by (queer-) feminist and postcolonial debates, collectivization qua identification has been intensely problematized. The reference to a homogeneous collective subject as a basis for political action hence possesses the danger of an identifying – often naturalizing – ‘locking-off’ and tends to lose track of differences or to deny their political productivity. If identification ceases to apply as a constituting factor of collectivities, how – if at all – can we think of a concept of collectivity that reacts upon these very critiques? How are categories of identity constituted that are able to politicize their own categories?

Experience and Collectivity

Subjectivity is constituted through experience. Is there a way to think about collective subjectivity as constituted through shared experiences? What characterizes such collective experiences and at what point do they shape the formation of collectives? To what extent can these collectives be understood as responses to particular experiences and the socio-historical realities underlying them? What role do stories and memories play here – such as those recalling the collapse of collective formations, or others, employing positive references to historical events? In what ways are memory and history/ies invoked or exploited in the politics of memory?

The Collectivity of Life Forms

“The Private is political!” This slogan stands for efforts to think collective life forms politically; for example in self-governing projects or in the context of feminist movements. In what does the political and social theoretical relevance of a critique of life forms consist? Or, rather, is ethical abstinence necessary? What would be the emancipatory potential of a politics of life forms? Are, for instance, new forms of collective cohabitation apt to open up larger political scopes of action? Or do forms like this gesture towards totalization?

The Psyche of/and Collectivity

Individual development requires participation in collective complexes. However, the complete absorption in such a collective might cause a loss of individuation. How, then, should we understand the collectivity of single psyches? What kinds of collectivity promote regression? What mass psychological impacts permeate authoritarian group structures? In contrast, what type of collective constitution yields emancipatory potential? In what manner can collectives function as a remedy for the psychological consequences of systematic violence? And how does collective trauma work against the agency of groups?

Economies of Collective Formations

Economic factors yield different collectives and are structurally embedded in them at the same time. How do we understand the historical potency of such forms? What changes in regimes of production and value creation become apparent in the formations currently emerging? What new forms of exclusion do they generate? To what extent do they urge us to rearticulate questions of collective and individual property as well as dispossession? What, in contrast, can be the role of alternative economic concepts and practices? What are the potentials of and limits to collective attempts to organize economies differently?

The Space of Collectivity

Where do we encounter collectivity? How is collectivity determined by space and how is space constituted through collectives? How do local conditions affect the holding, form, and/or appearance of a collectivity (squats, fabrics, university facilities etc.) and what kind of symbolism do these spaces convey? Is there a possibility to think space and collectivity together in a way that allows for a re-configuration of specific spaces that create thereupon new forms of democratic collectivity? And what kind of architecture prevents such an appropriation of spaces?

Collectivity as Methodology

Different theoretical traditions developed concepts of collectivity that have shaped political practice as well as empirical research in important ways – although, or even because they imply the refusal of any reductionism. We are especially interested in the tension between the conceptual and the empirical dimensions of collectivity: What role do theories about collectives play vis-à-vis empirical approaches? Which relations emerge in encounters of researchers and collective actors, for example in scholar activism? And to what extent do researchers reflect upon themselves as a collectivity within their academic practice?

The Collectivity of Art

Is art able to make a collective experience possible? Does, for example, the theatre have the capacity to disrupt the order of society as Plato suspected (and warned)? Might we deduce the possibility of an aesthetic opposition from this? Or does the audience – even after breaking down the ‘fourth wall’ – remain a passive recipient that merely consumes, and does art thereby stabilize structures of dominance? In what way do the ‘subjects’ of collective life appear in painting, theatre, film, and literature? One could also ask what role aesthetic self-expression plays for collectives?

Technical Details:

This call for papers addresses graduate students, postdoctoral researchers, and junior faculty members. We explicitly invite you to also submit work-in-progress or cooperative works. Furthermore, we will gladly accept artistic contributions, lecture performances, and artistic endeavors.

The conference language is English and German, with at least 50% of the presentations held in English. Abstracts may be submitted in both languages.

Abstracts should not exceed 400 words. Please attach a biographical note on a separate paper. Deadline for submission of abstracts is March 1st 2015. Candidates will be informed by May 1st 2015 whether their paper has been accepted for the conference. Paper presentations should be 20 minutes. They will take place in parallel panels during the three days of the conference. The panels are planned as discussion forums, meaning that each presentation will be followed by 20 minutes for discussion. In order to guarantee participation for everybody, we kindly ask the German speaking participants to provide an English summary of their papers beforehand.

Papers will be selected through a blind review process. Therefore, please do not include your name or other references to the author on the abstract and make sure to clearly state the title of your proposal in the e-mail and in the filename of the document. We will ensure that at least 50% of the presentations will be assigned to women. Should you be neither an English nor German native speaker, we kindly encourage you to note this on a separate paper, since we will try to pay special attention to that in terms of equality.

A limited amount of daily allowance will be made available by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) for graduate students coming as a group from countries of Eastern Europe, Africa, Asia, and Latin America. If interested, please inquire.

Participants in need of childcare during the conference time, please indicate. In cooperation with the equality office of Goethe-University efforts will be taken to facilitate childcare.

Contact:

Please send your abstracts and questions to:

info@graduateconferencefrankfurt.de

www.graduateconferencefrankfurt.de