



Research Project

Society as Experiment: Social Epistemology, Cooperative and Communal Practices in the Early 19th Century

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Project Outline:

The community projects of the British social reformer Robert Owen (1771-1858), the French social theorist Charles Fourier (1772-1837), as well as their proponents and detractors have been construed as “early socialist utopias” in several respects within the history of Europe in the period between restoration and revolution. Whereas, for historians of the future, they mark the dawn of modernity (Hölscher, ²2016), the history of political ideas takes them as responses to the social question (Euchner, ²2005). Overall, however, the projects are located in an ambivalent or even reactionary setting: on the one hand, the “early socialists” would generally approve of progress and seek both to diagnose and organise the future, while, on the other hand, their “remedies for pauperism” lend it more of a backwards-looking or religious categorisation (“Christian Messianism”) (Langewiesche, 2004). Mostly, these classifications in historiography perpetuate the classic utopian verdict of scientific socialism and give a disconcerting and crude connotation to the social theories. The fact that the future drafts were implemented within the scope of a scientific reform programme and on a global scale are hardly considered.

Community projects as social experiments

Without any doubt, the sets of economic, political and social beliefs labelled as “early socialist” described the organisation of ideal societies to be established in the immediate future by taking the contradictions of the present societies as a starting point. However, the “utopians” took the matter further and put their ideas into practice. Between the 1820s and 1860s, a variety of cooperative projects sprang up. These initiatives served as a blueprint for the new social order. By the same token, they were at the core of the social epistemology.

It is emphasized that in their reform plans developed against and within the emerging industrial societies, proponents of Owen and Fourier not only “discovered” and “deciphered” the details of the shaping influence of society on the individual. They also made the rational organisation of this relationship the basis of a new social science and experimented with its laws in specific communal and cooperative practices.

Thus, when discussing the realisation of these socio-political ideas, attention is usually limited to the failure of the settlement projects, which is presented as a falsification of the social theories. The settlement projects therefore prove that theory and practice are not compatible. But they are included neither in the history of the humanities nor in the history of the early 19th century. Consequently, they have not affected the picture of “early socialism”.

Social knowledge in the making

The current research project understands the productive associations as socio-political experiments and places them within a historical-epistemological perspective. The construction of this specific form of social knowledge will be analysed as a result of placing social problems into rational categories in the early 19th century. From this point of view, the social knowledge so produced represents a mode of contingency management. The project, therefore, looks at how the intersections of everyday patterns of perception and scientific concepts produced new “self-evident ideas about the nature of the world and the dimensions of its historicity” (Speich-Chassé/Gugerli, 2012).

Following a re-reading of the historiography of the 1920s/30s and 1970s, the body of this social knowledge compiled in the canonical texts and the dissident press will be set against the realisation of the socio-political reform programme in the relevant cooperative practices, in which the interplay between social architecture, social planning and social discipline comes to light.

From a history of knowledge perspective, the research project identifies and characterises constellations which led to the creation of alternative worlds within the conflicting fields of social criticism and community building, of utopia and life-experiment. The focus is on non-European settlements: in North Africa (Algeria), South America (Guyana, Brazil, Venezuela, and Guatemala), and the South Pacific (New Caledonia).

The objective of this research is, eventually, to identify the early 19th century as a transformative phase in the production of social knowledge, as characterised by its experimental and global character.

Publication in this Project:

Anne Kwaschik: Gesellschaftswissen als Zukunftshandeln. Soziale Epistemologie, genossenschaftliche Lebensform und kommunale Praxis im frühen 19. Jahrhundert, in: Francia 44 (2017), S. 189-211. [in German]