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Heroes – Heroizations – Heroisms

Transformations and Conjunctures from Antiquity to Modernity
Foundational Concepts of the Collaborative Research Centre SFB 948*

From antiquity to the present time, “from Achilles to Zidane” (so the title of a recent exhibition; Falliu/Tourett),¹ heroes have represented key elements of the cultural imaginary and the symbolic knowledge system of communities with remarkable persistence. The heroic plays a role in the understanding of cultural systems of meaning both in their *longue durée* and in their specific historical, social, and cultural manifestations and conditions. Recently, it has often been claimed that, after the disastrous two world wars, a ‘post-heroic’ age has begun, especially in Western European societies, and most prominently in Germany.² In current discussions, scepticism towards and even a rejection of heroism predominate (Bohrer et al.); at the same time, the need for heroic leaders seems to persist, sometimes emerges anew, and is often taken for granted.³ But how can we explain these concurrent positions?

“Whenever ‘heroes’ are admired, the question arises of ‘who is this needed by, and why’” wrote Jürgen Habermas in 2002 (178; see Metz/Seeßlen). Not surprisingly, Habermas made this statement in reaction to the events of September 11, 2001. Indeed, 9/11 produced more controversial heroizations – from the attackers, to the passengers of flight United Airlines 93, up to the fire fighters – along cultural, political and religious lines of conflict than any other event in the recent past. Leaving such momentous international

events aside, heroizations are on the rise again, and this requires a historical perspective. Why and how do communities rely on heroes to negotiate their identities and controversies? Why has this been occurring for such a long time, and why does it still occur today? Since July 2012, the Collaborative Research Centre SFB 948 “Heroes – Heroizations – Heroisms” has been exploring these and other questions, which we consider fundamental to the understanding of the conflicts between and cohesion of modern and pre-modern societies. The SFB’s project groups focus on this theme in history, visual culture, literature, music and sociology.⁴

Because of the current relevance of the topic, most recent academic studies on heroes have been geared towards the present – certainly more so than towards historical research.⁵ Often, recent studies do not consider periods before the nineteenth century, focusing their research instead on the time of grand ideologies, when national and war heroes were created, rediscovered and instrumentalized. This perspective is thus in danger of falling prey to retrospective causality, which works predominantly from results and tends to ignore older traditions and transformations, although the older traditions have as much impact on the present as current circumstances do. That the heroic still persists today seems to suggest a need for transhistorical, anthropological explanations for ideas about heroes, and hence a need for a more essentialist approach.⁶ However, relying on typologies runs the risk of overlooking the multi-faceted, competing, interdependent, and in parts contradictory concepts of the heroic and their historical and cultural manifestations. Studies that have primarily focused on periods in the distant past show a fascination for individual heroic figures and the history of their reception. However, these studies do not provide explanations for the foundation and figuration of these heroes in the context of their different systems of meaning, temporal and experiential spaces, or explanations for their construction as objects of veneration or

* This text summarizes the conceptual and theoretical foundations of the work of the SFB 948 as laid out by the authors for the group’s successful application for funding in 2011/12. It has not been further updated since that time. This is neither an account of the state of research, nor a presentation of current findings. Rather, it is an outline of the project’s starting points, which require critical review and adjustment throughout the course of research. The works cited and endnotes have therefore been kept to a minimum.

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rejection by different communities. More recent studies have begun to fill this gap by providing different perspectives – these, along with many productive individual research projects, provides a foundation for the SFB 948 to build upon.⁷ Nevertheless, the scarcity of comprehensive, comparative, transdisciplinary and synthetic research remains apparent.

This research situation can be best addressed by reviewing the historical foundations that are decisive for today's heroic discourses, beginning with antiquity and its wide-reaching impact, as a way of demonstrating continuities and discontinuities of traditions in the engagement with the heroic from a historical distance. This means that heroes must be studied as personified concentrations of social and cultural norm and value systems, and that their heroizations must be analyzed as complex processes involving different actors and media. The SFB 948 thus attempts to analyze heroic transformations, trends, forms and functions within certain communities from a *longue durée* perspective using a transdisciplinary approach (see Mittelstraß's *Transdisziplinarität* and *Methodische Transdisziplinarität*) paying special attention to ruptures, concurrent rivalries and formative historical traditions. The goal of the SFB 948 is to discover historical explanations for – and achieve a theoretical understanding of – the heroic from antiquity to the present.

Definition of terms

Heroic figure: The heroic manifests itself in heroic figures, meaning it is a cultural construct that others ascribe to someone, or which can be self-ascribed. Because it is contingent on specific cultures, groups and periods, an essentialist definition does not apply. Nevertheless, heroes do require a definitional description – for heuristic reasons, if nothing else. We therefore regard heroic figures primarily as persons who are real or fictional, living or dead, who are designated and/or presented as heroes, Helden, héros etc., to whom heroic characteristics are ascribed, including the qualities of agonality and extraordinariness and whose actions are often transgressive. A heroic figure is represented in different media (artistic and otherwise), has a charismatic effect and is admired by a community of followers (Weber 654-661). However, heroic figures also have fundamental physical and emotional qualities in common with their admirers, including the ability to act and suffer. According to this basic preliminary definition, the heroic is therefore a network of relations. As further,

inconsistent and infrequent attributes – such as self-sacrifice, death, honour and glory – can be added in different combinations to this definition, we believe that the heroic can be best described as a network of “family resemblances” (Wittgenstein §66). The definition of the heroic only truly becomes clear in relation to and in distinction from other forms of exceptionalism – the superhuman, the outstanding, the exemplary, the divine, the holy, the generally admired, everyday people or the ‘anti-hero’. The heroic can therefore only be explained in the context of this complex interplay of interwoven family resemblances, which, in individual cases, requires detailed elaboration in terms of their historical contingency as well as their persistence.

Heroizations: The qualities ascribed to heroic figures are variable. The process of attribution, in which different actors are involved and through which the figure becomes a “Gestalt-like focal point” (Plessner 48) of a community, is what we refer to as *heroization*. Heroizations occur and are stabilized through social and communicative processes. These processes require a mediated representation and are affectively and normatively charged. The specific forms of the processes of heroization depend on the actors involved and their motivations. Another aspect is the question of how and why the heroic is used as an attribute, and how it takes effect in the first place. It is precisely these processes that we are investigating at the SFB 948, along with the complementary phenomena of de-heroizations, contra-heroizations and divinizations.

Heroisms: 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’. Unlike the everyday and, often, also the academic usage of the term (see Huizinga; Faber; Naumann), 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 “internalized patterns” (143) with heroic connotations. By understanding heroism as a “socialized subjectivity” (ibid.), 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. By analyzing different kinds of heroic self-fashioning, we are able 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.

Transformations and conjunctures:[†] At the SFB 948, we analyze heroizations and heroisms based on systematic historicization, by which we mean political, social, cultural and media contexts. We rely on systematic historicization to explore transformations of the heroic and its manifestations, concepts and models. This means the research of dynamic processes played out between actors and traditions.⁸ Systematic historicization also allows us to study those periods when certain heroic patterns peak or undergo change, or to investigate the heroic in general over the *longue durée*. Which elements of the heroic are effective in the long run in the context of the family resemblances mentioned above? Which features compete with one another, which are replaced and which reappear? Which change, and in what way, and which are appropriated in what kind of form? All of these questions are addressed by the project groups of the SFB 948.

Theoretical starting points

Heroic figures, heroizations, and heroisms are characterized not only by their social, religious, political and aesthetic functions, but also by mediated expression, symbolization, and imaginative potential. Because heroizations and heroisms develop and unfold across tension-filled relationships and social negotiations, it is our goal at the SFB 948 to explore these constitutive elements in order to better understand the heroic. Therefore, the theoretical foundations of our research programme consist of the three elements listed below. The analytical potential of each will be tested in detail in the course of our working process and must

[†] Editors' note: In using 'conjuncture' as an abstract concept classifying duration, the authors follow Fernand Braudel, who distinguishes 'events', 'conjunctures', and the '*longue durée*'. Cf. Braudel 29-30; Santamaria/Bailey 78-83.

be developed further and adjusted with regard to the different perspectives of the individual project groups within the SFB 948.

Figurations from a social and personal perspective: In order to conduct a more precise analysis of those social processes that are constitutive for heroizations and heroisms, we rely on the term "figuration" as coined by Norbert Elias (139-145). Elias uses this concept as a way of replacing the juxtaposition between individual and society with a framework of interdependencies. We apply a modified version of Elias's notion of figuration in our analysis in order to better understand the connection between the personal perspective (with regard to heroic figures) and the social perspective (with regard to the actors involved in processes of heroization and heroisms). We define the mechanics of heroization as the interaction between the social figuration of a community and the personal figuration of the heroic figure. In this context, social figuration is considered as the network of relations between the hierarchies, rules and structures of communication within a social community. Personal figuration, on the other hand, is regarded as the set of qualities belonging to the hero that are also not independent of social position. When individuals are ascribed certain expectations by their social environment, they become a personal figuration – a surface on which social norms, frameworks for action and values can be projected. When understood as personal figurations, heroic figures represent an individual, 'Gestalt-like' offer to societies, a reaction to a collective need. They 'embody' this need in a literal sense in the form of a habitus profile, which is defined concisely by their deeds.

We are thus proposing an analytical approach that delineates the process of heroization as an ideal type. The ideal type is based on the interplay between the social figuration of a community and the personal figuration of a heroic figure, in which a human figure is ascribed a heroic role in a specific social figuration. A community constructs a type of figure – this could be a traditional model, or a newly developed type – and projects its expectations, wishes and fears onto this figure, regardless of whether the hero is imaginary or historical, dead or alive. However, it is important for a social figuration that the hero's qualities are grounded in reality, enabling the community to recognize itself and its own needs.

As social figurations, heroisms thus represent a collective re-appropriation of the projections entailed in a personal figuration. Why and how certain social groups attempt to symbolize themselves and their institutional orders through

certain heroic figures is one of the key questions of this research project. It is related to the question which distinctions, interferences and transitions exist between heroes and other personal figurations – for example, political rulers, saints, martyrs, prophets, ‘grands hommes’, geniuses, victims and gods.

This model alone, however, is not sufficient to explain the special power and effect of heroic figures – let alone their appellative, transgressive as well as imaginative qualities. We thus expand on it by adding the following two initial theoretical starting points.

Symbolic character and appellative power:

Within communities, the systems and institutions of social rule are only able to gain legitimacy and survive if they are symbolized. Symbolizations can occur in different forms: for example, through pure ‘representative symbols’ such as crests or certain terms, or through ‘symbols of presence’, which represent with greater immediacy that which is absent. Symbols of presence “do not merely define a sign of something, they are themselves a reality or part of a reality that is expressed in them” (Soeffner, *Symbolische Formung* 17). These symbols of presence consist not only of rites and rituals, but also of personality and habitus types, and they take concrete form in heroic figures, among other things. In a way, symbols of presence therefore belong to the “grand symbolism” (Schlögl 26) of a society that relies on them to assure itself of its identity and set of values. Symbols serve as way of identifying an affiliation (already implicated in the meaning of the Greek word *symbolon*; see also Soeffner, *Auslegung* 184-185). According to Gehlen’s theory of institutions, they also enable relief and a certainty of what to expect, thereby providing a stabilizing effect (Gehlen 204). Heroes could be understood as figures with this kind of symbolic significance, and heroization as the constitutive processes of this symbolism.

At the same time, heroizations do not generally go uncontested, but are the object and result of hegemonic struggles. They are subject to de-heroizations and to counter-heroizations by competing groups and/or within their own group, meaning that re-evaluations can occur. It has long been assumed that heroic figures emerge especially in crises of adaptation, when social orders erode or are not yet fully established (see Hegel 236-252; 340-341). This is especially the case when collective systems of interpretation – such as morals, beliefs, or gender norms – fail to offer a convincing range of meanings in reaction to changed situations. As symbols of presence (in the sense mentioned above), heroic figures

‘embody’ contradictions in such a way that they simultaneously and paradoxically represent “an isolated contradiction and the process of its harmonization” (Soeffner, *Symbolische Formung* 37). They allow “the dissonances of contradiction to be transformed into aesthetic consonances” in an especially effective way (Soeffner, *Protosoziologische Überlegungen* 58). From a terminological perspective, it is difficult to establish a single unifying term for this aesthetic effect; rather, the reference to heroes aims to “revoke the privilege of terms and arguments” (Soeffner, *Auslegung* 163). Like other symbols referring to normative orders, heroic deeds and heroic figures bestow “their own language on what cannot be conveyed argumentatively or expressed discursively” (Soeffner, *Protosoziologische Überlegungen* 60).

Unlike many other symbolizations, heroes also oscillate between acting as human individuals and being ascribed superhuman achievement, between confounding and stabilizing social order, between exceptionalism and the transgression or reassurance of norms. Within this suggestive field of tension, heroes possess a notable ability to motivate, inspire and lend meaning to the behaviour and actions of people. They encourage imitation or counteraction. One reason for this is that heroes are also human individuals with their own conflicts and emotions. The suggestive presence of heroes who are ‘Gestalt-like’ and active can suspend questions of meaning and reduce complexity because their presence prompts actions that no longer require reflection (Langbein 158; 161-163). In this way, orientation towards heroic figures achieves the status of ultimate justification. According to Max Weber, this represents the very charismatic effect that causes people to follow them (Weber 140; 654-661).⁹ The symbolic power of heroic figures is connected with the especially appellative character of their appearance and actions, which they acquire through their physicality and an often pronounced emotionality. Both their auratic presence and their performativity, which focuses strongly on public appearance, are important for their effectiveness; as a result, the special charisma of heroic figures is also an aspect of their medialization.

The constitution of the heroic by media and communication:

The heroic only actually becomes present in a society through its representation and communication via different media. In other words, “heroes need to be talked about” (Münkler 742). Following approaches of media theory, we propose that medialization develops a dynamic of its own in the composition of the meaning of the heroic (see, for example,

Fohrmann/Schüttpelz). The representation of heroic figures in different media has an institutionalizing power. We therefore analyze the mediality of the heroic and its foundation in social and personal figurations as mutually dependent factors in the creation of meaning.

For the analysis of the media-related conditions and communicative processes of heroization and heroisms, additional theoretical elements are required. The semiotics of culture, which understands and describes cultures as 'systems of semiotic systems',¹⁰ focuses on those agencies, cultural memories and archives, and processes of communication that are involved in heroizations within a society. In this context, codes function as rule-based connections between meanings and medialized forms of articulation. Within a given society, ideas of the heroic are coded by cultural conventions in a certain way and at a certain time; they can be passed down to following generations as traditions, which might then be transformed (see, for example, Nyíri). However, codes of the heroic do not exist in conceptual isolation; instead, they create overarching systems of reference, or discursive orders and 'languages of the heroic', which also belong to our scope of research.¹¹

Additionally, it is essential for the (impact of the) heroic that meanings emerge outside of linguistic and conceptual codes and become part of languages that are not clearly 'interpretable'. The appellative and affective character and the 'radiance' of heroic figures is based on such semantic excess, after all. It is certainly characteristic of the ability of the heroic to create meaning that it oscillates between conceptual comprehensibility and the ineffable (Fischer-Lichte 186). Heroes make an impact through 'embodiment' and through their 'aura'. Their influence unfolds through their immediate 'presence' (see also Gumbrecht; Scherer) and aesthetic intensity, rather than through conceptual signification. It is therefore one of our research goals to determine the nature of the intersection between media – the communicative constitution of the heroic – and the interpretation of heroic figures as 'symbols of presence' as outlined here. The heroic is essentially performatively constructed, in two ways: First, in the *actual performance* of a deed, and second, in the staging of the performance for (and by) others. As habitus patterns, heroisms are especially pronounced in staging the heroic; they are what allows communities to orientate themselves towards heroes.

Equally fundamental for the semiotics and performance of the heroic is the question of mediality and media contributions to the formation of meaning.¹² Our research project also works

on the assumption that different media can influence which qualities of the heroic may be represented poignantly (and to what degree), while also determining how heroic patterns are communicated and passed on in social contexts – one example being the comparison between verbal, pictorial and musical heroic narratives. This is why we incorporate a multitude of media and intermedia contexts, and this allows us to rely on a broad understanding of media. This understanding also includes the above-mentioned performative 'embodiment' of the heroic in heroic figures – in other words, the mediality of people and the body as a medium with its own forms of articulation (Faulstich 30-31).

The formative potential of the mediality of the heroic is especially pronounced in imaginative and artistic representations. Such representations, which constitute an important field of our investigation, not only include media of social self-observation and cultural self-interpretation (Bachmann-Medick); they also have the potential to remodel notions of the heroic or imagine them in a completely new way. As such, they make a significant contribution to transformations of heroizations and heroisms.

Because heroes are discussed in media, or 'narrated' in another way, thereby constituting their connection to cultural reality in the first place, we analyze these media and communicative processes according to Paul Ricoeur's model of a threefold (figurative) mimesis (Ricoeur 87-129). Ricoeur describes narrative practice as the connection between the three stages of the lifeworld context, formation and appropriation of the narrative. This corresponds to the following three forms of figuration: *Prefiguration* is the narrative's fundamental rootedness in the real world, real experiences and real conditions; *configuration* is the experiential formation of the narrative as a whole; and *re-figuration* describes the narrative's connection to, and appropriation in, the recipient's world. In our research thus far, the processes of heroization and heroisms, as well as the formation and appropriation of heroic figures, can be fundamentally described in this manner. It remains to be determined how sufficiently Ricoeur's model maps the notion of the social and personal figuration of the heroic as outlined above, and whether the semiotics of culture, hermeneutics and the social meaning of the heroic can thus be brought together at yet another intersection.

Goals of the collaborative research centre

With this in mind, the overall goals of the SFB 948 are as follows:

1. We understand and study the heroic as a socially contingent phenomenon that undergoes various historical transformations in a multitude of different experiential spaces. Heroizations and heroisms are the result of complex interactions between social and personal figurations, which is why we analyze their impact on the legitimization, stabilization and destabilization of social order and value systems. It is therefore important to investigate actors and their motivations and rivalries; the significance of categories of gender, generations, social status and class; as well as media and practices of appropriation.

2. We understand heroizations and heroisms as constitutive for the comprehension of systems of cultural meaning-making. The planned research of the semantics, forms of expression and cultural memories and archives of these systems will contribute to our understanding of how social communities function, cohere and erode. This is also true regarding the relationship of the hero to other figures, which are often similar – gods, saints, anti-heroes and negative heroes – in terms of their typologization, codes and their mediating function between normativity and exceptionality.

3. The heroic and its appropriations are categorically formulated in media and communication. This mediality, with its intrinsic dynamic and logic, resulting in a surplus of meaning and imaginative potential, is responsible for the particular effectiveness and suggestiveness of the heroic in cultures. The SFB 948 explores the formation, appropriation, traditionalization, and transformation of heroic models. We also study the unique potential and performativity of these models, as well as their aesthetics, their suggestive and emotional power. Most importantly, we focus on instances where the media-communicative and social contingency of the heroic intersect and the consequences of this intersection.

4. As phenomena of the *longue durée*, heroizations and heroisms must be analyzed and explained in a diachronic manner from antiquity to the present, i.e. through their transformation processes and conjunctures. In our research, we focus on long-term historical developments, cycles, and breaks; on heroic models and their semantic and media-related changes; as well as on the historical contexts of these phenomena

and the relationship between traditions and new configurations.

5. Different social, political, media and cultural influences result in phenomena and functional modes of heroizations and heroisms whose differences go beyond their location in different historical eras. Their specific manifestations should therefore be investigated not only diachronically, but also synchronically in comparison to different experiential spaces and competing concepts of the heroic. With this comparative perspective – which also incorporates the transfer between and interconnectedness of societies, states, and communities – we ultimately aim to avoid the restriction of our research focus to a single era, society, national state, national literature, or hero, which has dominated research in the past.

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¹ See the exhibition website, accessed 28 August 2019, <http://classes.bnf.fr/heros/>.

² For example, Münkler has been an important promoter of this.

³ See Körper-Stiftung, Klonovsky, and *brand eins*. See also ZEIT Online, Schulz, Schilling for the debate from February 2013 about the “hero without victims” and medals in the ‘drone war’.

⁴ For more information about SFB 948, please visit our website at: <http://www.sfb948.uni-freiburg.de/en/>.

⁵ See, most recently, Gerwarth, Jones, Osses, Schinkel, <http://www.helden-ausstellung.de> (accessed 28 August 2019); as well as van Marwyck, Imorde/Scheller, Reiling, Aurnhammer/Pfister.

⁶ For more on this, see Carlyle as well as Campbell.

⁷ See, for example, Immer/Marwyck. Allison/Goethals also offer a different approach with a focus on the present.

⁸ See Böhme, VII-IX, as outlined in SFB 644 “Transformationen der Antike”, accessed 28 August 2019, <http://www.sfb-antike.de/>.

⁹ We owe many key discussions about Max Weber’s notion of charisma to Michael N. Ebertz. See Ebertz in this special issue.

¹⁰ See, for example, Posner *Kultursemiotik* 55, and *Kultur als Zeichensystem*; as well as Robering/Seboek.

¹¹ In reference to “language of discourse”, a term coined by J. G. A. Pocock in *Concepts and Discourse* 58; see also Pocock, *Concept of a Language*.

¹² For comparisons to such positions, see, for example, Fehrmann/Linz 81-82.

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