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# Negations of the Heroic – A Typological Essay

Heroes are paradoxical figures. According to Niklas Luhmann (86), a hero produces "conformity through deviation", and further, displays this paradox in public "in order to be able to fulfil his socio-pedagogical function". Thus, according to Luhmann, the hero embodies "an exemplary surpassing of expectable accomplishments", and the carrying out of "services that are more than can be demanded" is "perhaps the most impressive semantic form that has developed in European history for morally regulated deviance." Here, 'morally regulated' refers to deviance that is suitable for serving as a model, endorsed as an example to be imitated. This could be understood as a general normative and action-theoretical definition of the heroic. The deeds of heroes fluctuate between norm creation, norm fulfilment, and norm violation, between exceptionality and exemplarity.

When Luhmann describes the hero as a semantic form, that is, as the demarcation of a difference that fulfils a socio-pedagogical function, or in other words, is meant to set in motion behavioural changes, this points to the action-oriented character of heroization. Hero stories are not so much descriptive as they are prescriptive; images of heroes do not so much record a likeness as sketch out examples. Whoever speaks of heroes and their deeds (or circulates heroic portraits, monuments, films, comics, and so forth) does so with a desire to motivate the audience (and possibly also oneself) to go beyond one's limitations, to fight and make sacrifices, to strive for great and exceptional accomplishments, or, at the very least, to humbly acknowledge the superiority of the heroes. Even if this is not always successful and invocations of the heroic frequently come to nothing or even

bring forth effects opposite to what was intended, it is still possible to feel something of the appeal's potential energy in its ironic distortion or rejection.

Heroic semantics create force fields that attempt to pull all those who come within their reach towards the heroic pole. They describe a *telos* towards which individuals strive, a *benchmark* against which they evaluate their actions, a daily *regimen* by which they improve themselves, and a *generator of truth* in which they are supposed to recognize themselves. But unlike iron filings in the vicinity of a magnet, the addressees of heroizations are not completely powerless against their forcefield. They may yield to its pull, rebel against it, or attempt to ignore it, but as long as the power of heroizations remain in effect, they are required to take a position in relation to it. Heroic narratives polarize: one can revere their protagonists or hate them; one can admire or laugh at them – but one cannot remain indifferent to them.

Starting from this paradoxical definition of the hero as a morally regulated deviant and the polarizing power of heroic semantics, we can derive the possible counter-models. The various counter-, anti-, non- and no-longer-heroes differ with respect to the normative value they are given and their position relative to the force field of the heroic. They oscillate between inertia and the active choice to ignore the motivating power of heroic appeals, between unwillingness and inability to heed such calls, between rejection of heroic claims and reversal of their polarity. *Counter-heroes* compete with heroes in an antagonistic field of opposite value orders and motivations for action; they serve as figures for identification in cases of conflicting heroizations. *Antiheroes* stand in opposition to the heroic code of behaviour; they do precisely what heroes would never do, and they avoid doing what is expected of heroes. *Non-heroes* fail in the face of heroic appeals or they remain immune to them. *No-longer-heroes* signal processes of de-heroization – once celebrated, they lapse into insignificance or are exposed to ridicule.

Considered formally, the basic modalities of negation can be identified as follows:

(1) *Quantitative Privation*: The figures belonging to this type fall short of the measure of heroic greatness. They lack exceptionality and, consequently, lustre. Rather than distinguishing themselves through overperformance, they remain in the realm of the average and expected, or possibly fail even to meet the standard of the norm. Without any charisma, they cannot gather any circle of admirers. While they heed the heroic summons, they lack the courage, ambition, or opportunity to carry out heroic deeds.

(2) *Qualitative Opposition*: This type of counter-hero is characterized by a reversal of the moral polarity. The figures belonging to this group unquestionably possess greatness, but it is a greatness in evil. More accurately, they are considered disgraceful and villainous according to the prevailing heroic code. Rather than accomplishing admirable heroic deeds, they perpetrate loathsome misdeeds, or are accused of doing so. While they are exceptional, they are anything but role models. They are not exemplary, but scandalous figures.

(3) *Categorical Difference*: Here the important feature is not underperformance or a change in polarity, but a change of register. Figures of this type do not fall within the reach of the heroic force field; they are excluded from it or manage to elude its pull. They are neither models of virtue nor terrifying monsters, but rather morally indifferent. They are automatically unsuitable for heroic deeds because of their social standing, profession, or gender – or because their very humanity is not accepted as a given. Heroic pathos does not move them, they are not interested in glory and honour, they want nothing of self-sacrifice, and they remain unsusceptible to other heroic evocations.

While quantitative privation and qualitative opposition are defined in direct relation to the heroic code – namely in terms of negation of the heroic qualities of exceptionality and exemplariness – categorical difference is more complicated: there is a virtually unlimited number of ways of being different, and mere lack of sameness does not by any means imply negation. If a person is not qualified to be a hero due to their lowly birth, they do not automatically become an anti-hero. In order for difference to become an antithesis, something else is necessary: Sancho Panza only achieves the status of a paradigmatic counter-figure because he and his peasant wit expose the unpractical heroic pathos of Don Quixote. Only to the degree to which heroic appeals are generalized can deafness to these calls or deliberate refusal to hear them be understood as negation. Only where heroic interpellations exert their force can immunity or refusal counteract them. Unlike figures of quantitative privation and qualitative opposition, which remain firmly rooted in the heroic canon of values in the way that the thief acts within the system of property ownership and the bankrupt business owner is defined by the imperative of economic success, the figures of categorical difference challenge the very validity of this canon. They are less an opposing force to the power of the heroic field, and more a suspension of it; they disrupt the flow of energy rather than reversing its polarity. It is these figures in particular who then provide the models that step outside (or remain beyond the reach of) the circle of power of heroic appeals. In other words, they mark out the limits of what can be heroized.

These three modalities of negation are useful for creating a typology of the counter-, anti-, non-, and no-longer-heroes because they can be related to specific dimensions of the heroic: First, heroes, as previously noted, are morally regulated deviants. Their deeds may bring them into conflict with what is right and lawful, but their exemplariness is beyond question. Second, heroes are admired or revered, and they must earn this distinction on a 'field of honour' (this may, but does not have to be, a battlefield). Third, heroes distinguish themselves through their exceptional and often agonal agency. They confront challenges, join battles, overcome obstacles, and establish order. Fourth, they must be prepared to make sacrifices and even, in extreme cases, to put their own life at stake.

Putting the three modalities of negation into a matrix with the four dimensions of the heroic produces the following **table**.

*Morally Regulated Deviance*: The alternative models to the heroic type and its exceptional, exemplary performance of good are, on the one hand, the *conformist* and the *everyman*, the ordinary man, who lack the transgressive quality; on the other hand, the *villain* and *traitor*, who turn the heroic performance into something negative and are condemned for it. Thirty years ago, Hans Magnus Enzensberger noted that "[i]nto the shoes of the village idiots and the oddballs, of the eccentrics and the queer fish" had stepped a new figure, "the average deviationist, who no longer stands out at all from millions like him" (Enzensberger 179). While the residents of the zones of normality can hope for benevolent irony in the post-heroic era, the stories of villains and traitors elicit fear and loathing, but also fascination. The question of *hero or villain*, *hero or traitor* is always political: One person's freedom fighter is another person's terrorist; what one person

| Modalities of Negation / Dimensions of the Heroic | Quantitative Privation | Qualitative Opposition | Categorical Difference |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Morally Regulated Deviance** | Conformist Everyman | Villain Traitor Terrorist | Opportunist |
| **Honour and Veneration** | Wannabe | Scapegoat | Infamous man |
| **Agency** | Sluggard Failure Dilettante | Berserker | Robot |
| **Willingness to Make Sacrifices** | Coward | Gambler | Victim |

**Table**: Four dimensions of the heroic, three modalities of negation.

sees as the exposure of state crimes, another sees as a betrayal of one's country. The type of the *opportunist*, by contrast, is characterized by a categorical difference, for this person acts based not on values, but on their own interests. While the traitor is someone who switches sides, opportunists are not loyal to any side. They do not decisively act in support of the cause of the good, nor do they arbitrarily side with the bad. Instead, they manoeuvre between the two. They avoid choosing in favour of one or another principle because they lack principles entirely.

*Honour and veneration*: Heroes are venerated; wannabe heroes want to be admired. Often their excessive ambition and hunger for charisma make them appear ridiculous. When the intention to be heroic is too obvious, it bothers the audience and destroys the heroic aura. Heroes must have a certain artlessness. Part of their paradox is that they are venerated not least of all because they carry out deeds for their own sake, not out of a desire for honour. This is precisely where the *wannabe* fails. The qualitative opposition of the veneration of the charismatic hero is the demonization of the *scapegoat*. While the former unifies all the positive emotions of a community in their person, the persecution of the latter draws all the community's negative energies (Girard). Both contribute to social cohesion. By contrast, neither veneration nor hatred are directed towards non-heroic figures, as Michel Foucault describes in his study of *infamous men* (Foucault 76-91). They fall outside the company

of the heroizable, but they also lack the dark lustre of daemonic counter-identifications. No *fama* precedes them, nor are they commemorated posthumously. They do not shine with their own light, but are illuminated by others. Infamous people are not forgotten, but only because at some point they found their way into the spotlight and left behind traces in the archives of history.

> What rescues them from the darkness of night where they would, and still should perhaps, have been able to remain, is an encounter with power: without this collision, doubtless there would no longer be a single word to recall their fleeting passage. (Foucault 79)

*Agency*: If action, courage, and decisiveness constitute some of the basic virtues of the hero, the counter-figures of the *sluggard*, the *failure*, and the *dilettante* lack precisely these qualities. The first is unwilling to hear the summons to action, the second lacks the power to obey it, and the third does not have sufficient skill. To be sure, virtuosos of comfort, passivity, and indecisiveness like Ilya Ilyich Oblomov, Bartleby the scrivener, or Jeff Lebowski still retain the ability to fascinate, but they do not provide material for heroic narratives. The same is true for the stories of inadequacy that accompany failures and dilettantes. Acting irresponsibly or simply being very unlucky can also make one into an antihero. *Berserkers*, by contrast, have an excess of combative fervour. Their rampaging knows no limits,

as they enter a state of near ecstasy in their rage – and with this mad fury they throw away both their chance at victory and their moral integrity (Shay 77-101). Suitable material for a hero is only the person who can cease fighting at the right time. If the berserker incorporates the violence of pure power of action, in the case of the *robot* one must ask whether they even possess agency. There is no doubt that machines are superior to humans in many ways: they can see more clearly and hear more precisely, they can process a much greater amount of information and call upon infinitely greater physical strength and endurance, they can move more quickly and are able to defy adverse conditions. Machines replace human agency and thus a basic characteristic of heroic figures, but can machines act deliberately? And can they be heroized? The imagined worlds of popular culture are full of anthropomorphized robots, but these characters only advance to the status of heroes when they demonstrate human qualities – above all the ability to make moral judgements, empathy and emotion – in other words, when they give up their robotness. Machines do not themselves operate in hero mode, for they lack a fundamental dimension of agency: the ability to make decisions. They process algorithms; they have no apparatus enabling them to heed the call of heroic appeals, or to refuse such calls.

*Willingness to make sacrifices*: Heroic deeds are distinguished not least by the fact that those who perform them put their lives at risk. Whoever calls for heroes, desires that their listeners do precisely that. For this reason, the invocation of heroes is a standard part of military mobilization. To be considered a *coward* is a devastating judgement wherever warrior heroism reigns – and it continues to be a punishable offence for soldiers even today: "fear of personal danger does not excuse an action if the soldier's duty demands enduring that danger", paragraph 6 of the German Military Penal Code (Wehrstrafgesetz) dictates. Also beyond the contexts of war and the military, it is a radical negation of heroic principles to value self-preservation over a noble goal, or to give in to one's inner voice of fear rather than allowing it to be silenced by propaganda. If the coward avoids danger, *gamblers* taunt it. Recklessly they rush into battle when prudence would dictate retreat; they sacrifice themselves and others, even if there is no need to do so, in short: they do not strive for victory or the act of salvation, but rather the thrill of adventure – and often enough, their own destruction. The semantics of the heroic speak only of *sacrifice*; it has no place for considering the *victim*. To accept that one's life is not, to rephrase Schiller,

a "good supreme" (see Schiller 136) can be extended to apply to each and every person – as it is in totalitarian regimes – and the only exception to this call are those who are themselves persecuted and made into victims. The figure of the *victim* stands for pure suffering; victims have harm done to them. They cannot be heroized because their persecutors extinguish their physical existence and deprive them of their subjectivity:

> Victims are impersonal subjects; they have no face, no voice and no place. Even if they are still alive, they are numbed and muted, displaced and uprooted. They embody the dark fringe of human societies, where doubts about the seemingly clear boundaries arise, where subjects are suddenly turned into objects and objects are endowed with a voice – a realm of haunting ghosts, monsters and nightmares in between common subjectivity and plain objectivity, a realm ruled by demons and deprived of humanity. (Giesen 53)

This cast of figures is by no means an exhaustive list of all varieties of negation of the heroic. The fool, the nerd, and the resigned are missing, to name only a few additional types. If other dimensions of the heroic were to be placed on the table – for example, by adding a row for agonality rather than subsuming it under agency, or by separating the transgressive and the exemplary elements from one another – the tableau would also change.

What is gained by creating such a compilation? Typologies occupy a middle ground between definitions (or the theoretical systematizations which build upon them) on one side, and exempla or case studies on the other. They allow for more nuanced descriptions than possible with definitions, and at the same time avoid the limited capacity of case studies to serve as a basis for generalizations. Typologies make comparisons between ideal types and therefore are heuristic in nature. They do not describe reality, but suggest how reality could be described and thus provide orientation for further research. They offer an organizational system for a particular field, and to this end they construct abstractions that leave aside the particular qualities of a concrete case. Instead, they take especially characteristic elements from the material of a historical-social constellation and consolidate it into "a unified thought construct" (Weber 90). The usefulness of typologies for guiding research must grapple with a number of difficulties: Firstly, typologies are ahistorical, and not capable of capturing historical transformations and processes of cultural translation. Secondly,

typologies suggest a comprehensiveness and systematicity that does not do justice to the diversity of the historical material. There is a place for everything in the table, but only *one* place. Thirdly, typologies overemphasize differences at the cost of relationships, hybrid constellations, and blurred boundaries. Therefore, they cannot replace either an analysis of constitution and function, or historical reconstructions. They are a theory-guided and theory-generating tool of cultural research – no more, no less.

Typologies are particularly suitable for the investigation of heroisms and heroization processes, because typification is part of the subject's own logic: heroic semantics construct figures, whether based on reality or fictional, who have paradigmatic qualities. Considered in their own right, each hero is unique; they become a morphological focus of a community only when they embody something greater than themselves. In other words, one becomes a hero as a type, not as an individual. The same is true for the various counter-, anti-, non- and no-longer-heroes from which the disparate elements of the heroic come to light *ex negativo*. By considering which figures are condemned, scorned, ignored, ridiculed, or unheroizable, it is possible to gain insight into which aspects of the heroic are particularly emphasized in a specific constellation. Ultimately, it is the lines of resistance that make visible the contours of a force field.

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