

Uncertain Times. Challenges of Societal Transformations

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“Modern times” – this we know since Charlie Chaplin at the latest – are times of insecurity. Insecurity is a typical feature of the modern age. In quite a fundamental sense, modern society is an “open society”: it opens up historically new options for our acting,, it starts undreamt of dynamics of development, it makes the future available for the present. Thus, however, both for those acting and for society as a whole also the vagueness and the uncertainties of social life are increased: the modern age is the age of contingency – and particularly also that of social awareness of the contingency of the social. Only very few things seem to be impossible, what is possible is uncertain. But being uncertain, this is both a threat and an opportunity.

Society – in the form of individual and collective actors, social movements and political elites – has reacted to this structural feature of the way in which it is socialized with numerous developments of institutions which either have strategically aimed at coping with contingency and reducing insecurity or at least have effectively resulted in it. Both concerning small things, everyday matters and overall, state matters – from micro-social ways of life as far as to macro-social structures, from the middle class family as far as to national insurance, from systems of social strata as far as to national borders – humans have tried to make the openness of the social situation fit to their lives by way of instruments of closing off, reducing, and embedding social acting. On the other hand, closing off and reducing are the enemies of open society and its ways of life.

In the history of the modern age and of modernization there has always been insecurity. Even more: without any problem, Alexis de Toqueville’s famous equality paradox can be extended by the paradox of social security. Just as equality, in modern societies also security seems to be an ideal which cannot be achieved, or to have it more exactly: it seems to be a need which is increasing just to the same extent to which society’s security guarantees are growing. Paradoxically, striving for security – or for ever more security – seems to come from just the attempts at institutionally meeting society’s security demands. At least in this way it becomes understandable that the diagnosis of insecurity becomes virulent just there – in social spaces and society circles – where the production of security is (has been) most intensive. Thus, it is definitely possible that the objective security situation and the subjective feeling of insecurity drift apart from each other. In this sense, insecurity is the other, undeceivable side of a society which is systematically looking for security.

Why then – if not in such an overall historical sense, typical for the epoch-making “project of the modern age” – should we speak of insecure times in the year 2008? Is our insecurity

today different from the kind of insecurity humans experienced two hundred, one hundred, or just fifty years ago? Probably it is the deep transformation of the social situation of the long post-war period, characterized by seemingly limitless economic growth, continuous political stability, and effective guarantees of the welfare state, which is the specific feature of “new insecurity” at the beginning of the 21st century. A transformation which is not reduced and cannot be reduced to the post-Communist change of systems and its consequences. It is rather that currently we experience a plurality of transformations, a complex constellation of social transformations in the East and the West, in the North and South of worldwide society, which in respect of its social significance and its consequences does not seem to be far away from Karl Polanyi’s image of the “great transformation” towards market society.

Today we, the citizens of the late-industrial societies of the (extended after 1989) West, are looking back to a short Golden Age during which security had taken up a new shape – as we now know: only temporarily. During a happy historic period (at least in the so called “OECD Space”) of the development of societies insecurity had become – or at least seemed to have become – fightable, solvable, even defeatable. Dangers for individual and collective security – from unemployment as far as to nuclear war – were changed into calculable risks of the personal and social way of life by extended state-political interventionism. During the “short dream of everlasting prosperity” (Burkart Lutz) the phenomenon of insecurity retreated behind institutional security guarantees and promises of the western-welfare state modern age like the phantom retreats to the back of the opera stage – until it returned from the depths of the globalized space to step into the limelight of societies, and it is even more prominent and maybe even more radical than ever before. By a first, preliminary structuring the phenomenology of contemporary insecurity which shall be in the focus of this congress’s interest shows four dimensions.

Firstly, for two decades now we have been in the midst of societal change triggered off by the breakdown of State Socialism, a breakdown which after all is itself an expression of the still unchecked development dynamics of capitalism. The bipolar competition of the systems has been replaced by the financial market-driven and (thus) definitely US dominated but nevertheless multipolar constellation of global competition. By being communicated by supra-national actors and trans-national regimes, the latter is the context of the development (and the development problems) not only of the new, market-economic democracies of the former “Second World”. Also the development-economic “fast start” societies of Southeast Asia, the left-wing populist or only populist “special way” movements of South America, and the subsistence, misery, and exploitation regimes of sub-equatorial Africa operate within a context which is set by the international political economy of post-Communist transformation. The dynamizing opening up of economic, cultural, and social spaces has – more or less,

directly or indirectly, immediately or in a derived way – reached the entire planet. In this sense, all national societies of this world are transformation societies.

Secondly, this is specifically true also for the welfare state societies of the West which are much more affected by the feedback effects of Eastern European transformation of systems than they were ready to believe for a long time. The institutional cornerstones of their social model, fired by the constellation of the economic growth of post-war prosperity, have shown cracks in the course of the past two decades. Thus, however, both the individual and collective security of planning and expectations which in these societies the welfare-capitalist agreement was able to communicate at least to wide parts of their female and (particularly) male citizens is increasingly fading away. For ever more bigger groups of western, particularly European waged work societies flexible employment and precarious living conditions become an experience of insecurity which is really new – and potentially politicizeable – at least in the comparison of generations. Due to changing economic structures, employment patterns, and educational careers, the gender agreement of the “male breadwinner marriage”, which – given all derivations – was typical for the Fordist formation of society, is under increasing functional and legitimation pressure. The social reality of late-industrial societies tells about traditional gender roles being increasingly shaken – and thus also about a future of society which is characterized by “gender trouble”, but also by new ways of life.

Thirdly, in the more recent past a dimension of social insecurity has developed which possibly even more than the two aforementioned ones is perceived as existential insecurity. On the one hand, the information- and communications- technological revolution – apart from all its obvious blessings for everyday life particularly in the progressed industrial societies – has resulted in the development of new kinds of risks. They reach from the constant danger of destructive virus attacks on personal computers as far as to immensely grown, technology-based possibilities of social control and surveillance. Potential terror of technology is on the one hand corresponded by the technology of terror which since September, 2001, at the latest has been present worldwide and at every time – or the presence of which is at least also politically-medially (and of course by the police and the armed forces) suggested, produced, and reproduced. The “danger of terror” has become both a universal and a ubiquitous element of the world-political metabolism of motivations and the metabolism of the feelings of the citizens of the world. Its new nature may be seen in the fact that this horror – at least as far as societal perception is concerned – is faceless and anonymous and “lurks always and everywhere”. For the accompanying process of the social production and communication of knowledge which is characterized by the parallelism of the de-limiting of feelings of being threatened (e. g. by Islam “as such”) and by the visualization

and personification of danger (e.g. in the person of Bin Laden) the electronic-digital mass media play both a crucial and an ambivalent role.

Finally fourthly, here a first-rate factor of social insecurity must be named, the consequences of which - successfully politically and socially suppressed (at least for the time being) - are sociologically mostly not understood: the so called climate change. Even if the medium-term and immediate social follow-up effects of global warming, from national energy policies via international distribution struggles as far as to trans-national wanderings, can at best be partly recognized, already today in this respect two sociologic fundamental insights may be formulated: the economic and social costs of an economy being based on consuming fossil fuel can no longer be successfully externalized (i. e. unloaded onto third parties) but must be internalized in a "risk-society" way. Thus, we must take into account (in the double-sense of the word) that in future the "western way of life" to which we are used and which has been habitualized over many decades will have to be changed in a truly revolutionary way. Given the existential significance of this problem, the search for new ways of the - necessarily collective - social production of security may be expected to be even more difficult and full of conflict than it is the case with the three aforementioned dimensions.

Given all the negative visions of insecure times, it must be particularly emphasized that constitutively insecurity - by all its above-mentioned dimensions - also shows a productive aspect. Insecurity is an elixir of life for society. Schumpeter's image of enterprising, innovative, and creative acting in and out of a situation of insecurity - when the actor spontaneously takes "a risk" - may claim axiomatic validity and life-practical plausibility not only for the more restricted field of the sphere of economic acting. Insecurity is not only an economic but definitely also a political, technological, cultural, and even social resource of productivity - as long as it stays or is kept within defineable limits. It is the de-limiting of insecurity, its embedding and unleashing, which may make this social productive power become socially problematic and destructive.

Not at last against this background, and absolutely in the sense of Polany's idea of social-historic development, the partly crawling, partly virulent feeling of insecurity of society has created a variety of - political, cultural, social - countermovements of security production in the countries of the "First World". In respect of their social significance, even they again are of a highly ambivalent nature. The late-modern, reactive security regime reaches from the institutional conservatism of political elites via the desperate war on terror and the border regime of the highly developed (potential) immigration nations as far as to cultural reassurance by way of a policy of ethnic belonging. On the one hand we face a variety of phenomena of socially closing up spaces of solidarity both towards the outside (e. g. at the Canary Islands) and towards the inside (e. g. German pay policy), on the other hand we face the development of new spaces of solidarity in the course of trans-nationalization processes

(European integration). We experience the ongoing privatization, individualization, and subjectivation of risks of individual existence, the transformation of social security guarantees to the individual's security-generating provisions activity. We become witness – objects and subjects – of population and family planning, of the production of public (instead of collective) and personal (instead of social) security, from online surveillance as far as to preimplantation diagnostics, from smoking prohibition as far as to data storing and preventive detention. For the sociologic observation of the present time there is the image of an unstoppable and uncontrollable development towards the fiction of a “security society” which as such falls victim to the security paradox by its option (going as far as to obsession) for security producing, supporting, and radicalizing feelings of insecurity. This way there develop ever more insecurities which an unleashed political, social, and military administration tries to take up. As in the case of the productivity of insecurity, also here it is possible to show structural limits of the production of security – limits which at the latest will be reached where the disciplining, control, and administration of public life become a danger for our freedom and undermine those principles as being constitutive for liberal democracies.

All the mentioned phenomena, the positive and negative challenges of insecure times, just as the movements and countermovements of “security society”, provide a wide field for intellectual work at a scientific congress which at least might help with reducing the insecurities of knowledge of insecurity – if there was not another paradox of the modern age: the knowledge paradox. Inevitably, by the growth of (scientific) knowledge at the same time also our knowledge of not knowing increases, and thus our awareness of the contingency of the social. Thus, social life – and this seems to be certain – will stay to be structurally insecure even after the 34th Sociology Congress. However, as such it will be under increased sociologic observation. “Modern times” are uncertain times – and the times of sociology.

On behalf of the DGS Board: Hans-Georg Soeffner, Georg Vobruba

On behalf of the local organization committee: Klaus Dörre, Stephan Lessenich