

### **Civility. An interdisciplinary and comparative approach**

**Veranstalter:** Britta Baumgarten; Jan C. Behrends; Dieter Gosewinkel; Dieter Rucht; Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung; Volkswagen-Stiftung  
**Datum, Ort:** 23.04.2009–25.04.2009, Berlin  
**Bericht von:** Jan C. Behrends, Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin

Sociologists, philosophers, historians, and anthropologists met at the Social Science Center (WZB), Berlin, to discuss possibilities for an interdisciplinary and comparative investigation of the notion of „civility“ in the modern era. The workshop consisted of six thematic panels as well as the presentation of a prospective project on civility that is being prepared by the convening researchers. In his opening remarks DIETER GOSEWINKEL (WZB) outlined the main problems and prospects of research on the concept. He discussed the problems of defining the „civility“ and finding the adequate fields for empirical research. Gosewinkel stressed the ambivalences inherent to the concept, e.g. the tensions between the universal pretensions and the exclusionary practices connected to it. Ideas about civility not only justified the expansion of individual rights; they also served as the ideological motor behind „civilizing missions“ in European colonies and, as Norbert Elias famously asserted, imposed means of constraint on the individual's manners. Depending on the perspective „civility“ might thus be viewed as a disciplinary force or as a means to broaden the individual's rights. Additionally, the role of the state both as a driving force behind civilizing processes as well as a destroyer of civilian norms needs further exploration. Thus, a whole range of both empirical and theoretical questions about „civility“ need to be addressed.

The workshop's first panel explored the history of the concept. HOLGER NEHRING (Sheffield) pointed to the ambivalent effects of the civilizing process in Europe. In the tradition of Elias, he views „civility“ rather as a process than as a state of affairs. Nehring emphasized the connections between civility, violence, and the legacies of war and colonial

rule. He portrayed civility as a concept constantly challenged – not the least through the citizen/ soldier who needs to be re-civilized after times of violent conflict. KONRAD H. JARAUSCH (ZZF Potsdam / Chapel Hill, NC) picked up the criticism of the American concept of western civilization. He then focused on the process of re-civilizing of (West-) Germany after National Socialism. Jarausch notes the resurgence of etiquette in the Federal Republic as one way of re-establishing moral order – a regime of civil norms that was promptly questioned by the generation of 1968. Whether „civility“ or „human rights“ is the more auspicious concept for further research remains an open question for Konrad Jarausch. Additionally, JENNY WÜSTENBERG (Chapel Hill) presented her PhD-project on civil activism and democratic memory in West Germany during the 1970s. In his commentary BERND WEISBROD (Göttingen) stressed that „civility“ should be examined as a learning process, as the making and unmaking of liberal politics. The discussion pointed to the fact that civility itself may also be seen as the foundation of legitimate violence.

The second panel dealt with the connection between civility and social rights. JEANNETTE MADARÁSZ (WZB) presented a paper written by herself and MARTIN LENGWILER (Basel) which examined the German tradition of the welfare state, including its ruptures during decades of dictatorship and its continuities throughout political systems. Madarász and Lengwiler see the welfare state as a complex system of individual and collective rights which doesn't easily relate to the notion of „civility“ with its universal claims because the welfare state is still essentially a national institution. PAUL ANDRÉ ROSENTHAL (Paris) explored the relationship between state sovereignty, social welfare and migrant's rights in 20th century Europe. Rosenthal can show that from its very beginnings the welfare state was challenged by worker's migration across borders. He discussed how social protection for migrants was either granted or denied and which lines of arguments were used in the struggle for equal social rights. In his commentary, JAMES HOLSTEN (Berkeley) pointed to the limited dependence bet-

---

ween civility and social rights. Holsten claimed that social welfare may be seen as a system of incivility. He advocated to rather study the concept of „civility“ within the framework of „citizenship“.

HELMUT DUBIEL (Giessen) and MERVYN FROST (King's College London) explored the connection between civility and human rights on the third panel. Dubiel elaborated his idea of the negative universalism of human rights. He sees the concept of human rights as inseparably linked to the catastrophes of the 20th century. Mass-killings by the regimes of the radical left and right on an unprecedented scale have laid the foundation for a humanistic consciousness that transcends geographical, national or ethnic borders. According to Dubiel, the utopian vision of a universalistic validity for human rights is grounded in the horrific experiences of totalitarian rule. Mervyn Frost sees the concept of civility in international relations as an area which is thus far understudied. From a British perspective, Frost outlined the inherent meanings of being civil, potentially restraining one's emotions and thus acting inclusively towards everyone. In his commentary STEFAN-LUDWIG HOFFMANN (ZZF Potsdam) raised the question how we can explain the popularity of the concept of human rights in the 1990s. While western civilization served as a point of reference during the Cold War, human rights became a key term after the collapse of communism. It is noteworthy, that some of the major wars fought after 1989 were waged in the name of human rights.

The fourth panel focused on the relationship between civility and citizenship. Presenters ANDREAS FAHRMEIR (Frankfurt am Main) and CATHÉRINE COLLIOT-THÉLÈNE (Rennes) explored the subject from historical and philosophical perspectives. Fahrmeir's presentation focussed on political protest and incivility in Britain and France at the dawn of the modern age. From the 18th century well into the 1850s a carnivalesque and often violent form of protest against established authority was widespread on the streets of London. Fahrmeir interpreted these rough rituals in the public space of the street as a contrast to the elites' civility on the rather secluded corridors of power in par-

liament. When most male adults were included in the political nation through the extension of suffrage from the 1850s onwards, the need for such spectacles diminished. Thus, Fahrmeir made a strong case for the civilizing effects of parliamentary representation while at the same time pointing to the ongoing discussion about the role of the „crowd“ and the „mob“ – the uncivilized – in European history. In a comparative perspective the author could show that civil treatment of citizens was broader and less class based in Britain than in early modern France. Fahrmeir stipulated that a peculiar British notion of civility which dates back to the early modern period needs further exploration. Cathérine Colliot-Thélène discussed the specific meaning of civil disobedience in contemporary France. She outlined the differences between the Anglo-Saxon tradition as formulated by Henry David Thoreau, Hannah Arendt and others to the French idea of legitimate order based on Rousseau's *volonté général*. Once again, her paper illustrated how much notions of civility differ even within the context of western and central Europe.

On Saturday the workshop convened for two final discussions on civility and social behaviour and a concluding panel on theories of the concept. Panel five consisted of papers on the anthropology of civility by CHRIS HANN (Halle an der Saale) and notions of civility in everyday life by FERDINAND SUTTERLÜTY (Frankfurt am Main). Hann discussed recent contributions from the anthropological field to the study of civility. He emphasized that he sees Italy as the heartland of civility (*civiltà*) and pointed to recent field research has led him to the conclusion that incivility rose in Eastern Europe after the fall of communism – a result that runs contrary to common findings of political and historical research. Chris Hann pointed out that post-socialist conditions – especially the rise of liberal market economies – have hindered the development of civility between central Europe and Siberia. Ferdinand Sutterlütty gave a paper on the results of his study of hotspots of urban development in the west of Germany. He focussed on the relations between citizens of Turkish and German origin and their conflicts. He elaborated on

the paradox that the quest for equality between different ethnic groups might enhance rather than acquiesce conflicts in the local realm. In neighbourhoods under investigation, the counter reactions against the enforcement of equal rights uncut the norms of civility.

The final panel discussed two contributions to the theory of civility. FRANKLIN ADLER (Malcalester College) discussed questions of immigration and identity in contemporary Europe. He outlined the sometimes problematic consequences of multiculturalism in the age of globalisation and pointed to the shortcomings of modern sociology that hinder our understanding of these ongoing processes. WILHELM HEITMEYER (Bielefeld) tried to explain why uncivil behaviour exists in certain parts of modern societies. He argues that incivility is found wherever basic norms of respect and equality are challenged. Heitmeyer uses a concept of social disintegration to understand the perceived rising threat to civility. According to his model, the loss of civility is closely connected to the social agenda of modern societies. Those denied recognition and material success are most likely to turn to violent modes of self-expression. Heitmeyer pointed to recent killing sprees and school shootings as examples of social disintegration which led to violence. In his commentary on the two papers GÜNTER FRANKENBERG (Frankfurt am Main) outlined a scheme of operationalization for civility research. Frankenberg concluded that it would be necessary to clearly define the issue, name the conflicts and to analyse cultures of conflict in a thick description.

During the final discussion, the conveners and their distinguished guests elaborated on different roads that could be taken in future research. Among the approaches discussed were the historical dimension of the concept dating back to Scottish enlightenment, thick descriptions of every-day life, the relationship between civility and community as well as civility, citizenship and democracy. Overall, the workshop was characterized by open discussion that transcended the various disciplines represented. Clearly, the concept proved to be a stimulating one which opens new perspectives on the history of modernity. „Civility“ – explored from a interdisciplinary as well as

comparative perspective – poses a both difficult and challenging perspective for the historical and the social sciences. The feedback from the discussion as well as the complexity of the issue has convinced the conveners to continue their investigation of „civility“ from both a historical and sociological perspective. The relationship between civility and violence, the relationship interrelation between legal rights and norms of everyday civility, the integration of non-western traditions both into the history of the concept „civility“ and into empirical research on institutions are among the challenges waiting to be met in future discussion and research.

### Conference Overview

Welcome speech

Dieter Gosewinkel

#### *Panel I: Civility – History of the Concept*

Chair: Dieter Gosewinkel

Holger Nehring „Civility. Some observations on the history of the concept“

Konrad Jarausch „German civility? Conceptual pitfalls and exemplary processes“

Jenny Wüstenberg „Civil activism and the making of democratic memory“

Discussant: Bernd Weisbrod

#### *Panel II: Civility and Social Rights*

Chair: Wilhelm Heitmeyer

Jeannette Madarász / Martin Lengwiler „Civility and social rights in the modern welfare state“

Paul-André Rosental „State sovereignty, social welfare and migrants' rights?“

Discussant: James Holston

#### *Panel III: Civility and Human Rights*

Chair: Jan C. Behrends

Helmut Dubiel „Civility as self-restraint“

Mervyn Frost „Constituting human rights“

Discussant: Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann

#### *Panel IV: Civility and Citizenship*

Chair: Günter Frankenberg

Andreas Fahrmeir „Civil rioters: Managing citizens' violence in nineteenth-century Britain“

Catherine Colliot-Thélène „Civil disobedience between civility and citizenship“

---

*Panel V: Civility and Social Behaviour*

Chair: Konrad Jarausch

Chris Hann „From civiltà to vigilant citizens:  
Some recent anthropological contributions“

Ferdinand Sutterlüty „Negative classification  
and ethnicity: Norms of civility in everyday  
urban life“

*Panel VI: Civility – Theory of the Concept*

Chair: Dieter Rucht

Franklin Adler: „The hermeneutics of civility“

Wilhelm Heitmeyer „Societal disintegration,  
civility and violence“

Discussant: Günter Frankenberg

Tagungsbericht *Civility. An interdi-*  
*disciplinary and comparative approach.*  
23.04.2009–25.04.2009, Berlin, in: H-Soz-  
u-Kult 18.06.2009.