

Critical Potentials of Secularist Practice

Veranstalter: Institute for the Study of Religions, Leipzig University; Humanities Centre for Advanced Studies „Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities“, Leipzig University

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The international conference „Critical Potentials of Secularist Practice“, convened by Katharina Neef and organized by Inge Fiedler, took place between the 27th and the 29th of May 2019 in the Leipzig University. It was a joint conference of the Institute for the Study of Religion and the Humanities Center for Advanced Studies „Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities“, funded by the German Research Society and the Association „Releff – Freunde und Förderer der Religionswissenschaft Leipzig“. The conference shed light on the critical potentials of the religious and cultural setting in the run of the late 19th and 20th century, that enabled it for some secular positions to melt into what we nowadays call a modern secular lifestyle. The focus was on the practical level – what kind of practices did the secularists have and which strategies did they use to legitimize them? A central point of reference was their relation to religion, in terms of affirmation, negation or ignorance, which was framed in a comparative and international perspective.

The specific historical and contemporary significance of the city of Leipzig as a center of critical thought and secular practices became evident from the welcome speech of CHRISTOPH KLEINE (Leipzig), which started with Martin Luther's reformation and concluded with the unique profile of the Institute for the Study of Religions and its new chair for the critique of religion. The holder of the chair, HORST JUNGINGER (Leipzig) later held a keynote on the critical potentials of the secular study of religion, that, in his opinion, needs a critical approach to its subject like any other science does. In these terms he argued for the academical critique of religion to be a methodological approach, not an

act that aims at putting an end to religion and warned that its negation in the academic field would make place for its transition to other levels of discourses and to its instrumentalization for political or religious propaganda, for instance. The conclusion was nonetheless, that irrationality is not always a religious feature and nor is secularism always a synonym for reason – an impression, that sneaked through the whole conference. KATHARINA NEEF's (Leipzig/Chemnitz) introductory remarks gave the last impetus for the meeting by pointing out the plurality of the free thinker's secular agendas, which need to be analyzed in a transnational and global framework.

DIRK SCHUSTER (Potsdam) opened the first section on the role of secular practices in the process of community building with his paper on the scientification of atheism in the GDR. Based on the theory for the social construction of reality by Berger and Luckmann, he focused on the domain of knowledge as substantial in this process. Using the example of the chair for scientific atheism established at the Jena University in the 1960s, he argued that the scientific examination of atheism had not only the potential for critique of religion, but also one for a critique of the Marxist ideology. Since the main aim of the chair to scientifically prove the superiority of rationality over religiosity remained unfulfilled, doubt about the whole political ideology emerged.

The political dimension of secular practices was topic also of the paper on the socialist secularism in Czechoslovakia 1918–1921, presented by JOHANNES GLEIXNER (Prague). He pointed out the shift of the border between secular and religious activism in the first years of the new state. Many free thought activists in Czechoslovakia proclaimed the division of state and church out of nationalistic and political motives like for instance the emancipation from catholic Austria, rather than for anticlerical reasons. Gleixner framed these actions in the context of national identity building, taking place in the first years of state sovereignty and proposed the question whether they can be characterized as secular or not.

Both ANJA KIRSCH (Basel) and ANTON JANSSON (Lund) spoke on the impact of religiosity and secularity on free thought com-

munities in the USA and in Sweden in the 19th century. Exploring the utopian community New Harmony, established by the German radical pietist Johann Georg Rapp (1757–1847) in South-West Indiana in 1805, Kirsch asked whether it is possible to build a successful utopian society without religion? While under Rapp's divine economy and inward biblical study the community was flourishing, in the domain of its rather rational and religiously critical next owner Robert Owen (1771–1858), it collapsed. After giving some insights of Swedish secularism and freethought movements around the 1880s, which used to copy Christian practices, Jansson focused on the intellectual and educational reformer Ellen Key (1849–1926) and the freethought community built around her. Key didn't want to use Christian elements anymore and transformed the „Gottesdienst“ into a „service of life“, which followed an organic principle. Jansson argued that, in doing so, she secularized the Swedish free thought movement, which was evident from the fact that Key's successors had an atheistic self-image.

It is the authors opinion that the papers of DANIEL LAQUA (Newcastle) and that of CHRISTOPHE VERBRUGGEN (Gent) can both be understood in the broad framing of community building. Using different research methods, they explored the process of creation of an international freethinkers' movement in Europe in the 19th and 20th century. Laqua pointed out the identity-giving role of international conferences, e.g. the International Congress of Rome in 1904, Paris in 1905 and Brussels in 1910, for the constitution of a common self-vision. Through intensive networking during these meetings the secularist actors constructed the narrative of an international freethought tradition rooting deeply in the past. As part of a bigger project, based on the network analysis as a methodological approach, Verbruggen explored the eco-system of freethought movements at the beginning of the 20th century, analyzing organizations and periodicals. He proposed the question which relations were constitutive for the movements and how secularist actors used to interact in different settings. One of his findings is that the social reformers and their affiliation in so-

cial projects and conferences gave new impulses for the public discourse and made the 1900s pivotal for the renewed interest in the human rights framework.

The talk, which THOMAS SCHMIDT-LUX (Leipzig) gave on architecture and secularity in the second section of the conference, provoked a lively discussion about the contemporary public debates on the negotiations between the religious and the secular sphere in the city center of Leipzig. Interpreting architecture in the modern period as not only a mirror of reality, but also as an instrument of power demonstration, he searched for the ideologically framed concepts of style in 20th century examples. Using the cases of Turkey, India and the Soviet Union, Schmidt-Lux exemplified how architecture can be used as a secularist practice or as means to strengthen or criticize an ideological system.

A big slot in the conference program was left for the *rites de passage*, constituting section three – from baptism and marriage to burial ceremonies. ANTOINE MANDRET-DELEIGH (Toulouse/Paris) gave a talk on the reception of civil baptism in France. He gave an overview of the history of the practice from the late 19th till the late 20th century and pointed out that civil baptism had the catholic one as a reference and therefore copied some religious elements from it. Mandret-Deleight's comprehensive research focused on the reception of civil baptism in the Catholic Church, in the municipal authorities and in the central state authorities, reflecting on every actor's motives for respectively criticism, support or ignorance towards this practice.

JENNY VORPAHL (Potsdam) presented a paper on the institution of civil marriage in the GDR, stressing on the fact that, similarly to the civil baptism in France, no new elements were adopted for the so called socialist/red weddings, but some old religious ones were revived and re-evaluated as civil. The strategies for legitimization of the red weddings always traced back to the political-ideological level, but surprisingly Vorpahl found that they created much more potential for internal criticism towards the socialist political system than towards religion.

Three papers explored the topic of the critical potentials of burial ceremonies in dif-

ferent parts of Europe. CHRISTOPH DE SPIEGELER (Brussels) compared the attitudes towards civil funerals in the most impressive freethought associations in 19th century Belgium. They were considered an important strategy among freethinkers to weaken the cultural power of the religious bodies and clear the ground for new secular practices. HELENA TÓTH (Bamberg) identified two phases in the state policy to secular funerals in GDR. Prior to 1961 the state believed that by eliminating the church it would also eliminate the religious practices, but since this did not occur, the *Institut für Kommunalwirtschaft* was established. Its aim was the nationalization of cremation not only for antireligious, but also for pragmatical reasons like the lower costs in comparison to a normal funeral. CAROLIN COSUCH's (Rome/Göttingen) paper, based on José Casanova's definition of secularism, used the examples of Italy, Germany and the USA to highlight the reformative function of cremation. It shifted the personal authority from the priest to the physician, which was first considered anticlerical and criticized from religious actors, but with the time first the Protestants and then the Catholics accepted the burning of corpses. Nonetheless it was for practical reasons like hygiene and expenses, that cremation became so popular in the 20th century Germany.

The fourth section was dedicated to education and socialization and that is where KATHARINA NEEF (Leipzig) and STEFAN SCHRÖDER (Bayreuth) presented their papers on the religious and secular school education in Germany from the end of the 19th century till the present times. Neef offered a historical overview of the German educational system, which was highly religious prior to the beginning of the 18th century, when it slowly began to secularize. Today there is again religion as a school subject, but in 1919 Leipzig was a core of secular agitation. This resulted in the cessation of the clerical part of the curriculum in favor of ethics and other world-view-based subjects. The secularization of education played a crucial role in the state-church relations and in the negotiation of the religious concepts. Schröder elaborated further on the history of religious education in Germany, pointing out the legal

aspects of the educational arrangements as a state as opposed to a federal issue. Then he focused on the successor of the German Freethinkers Association – the Humanist Association, established in 1993 in Berlin and commented on the shift in the secular agenda from the eradication of religion from schools to the pluralist view of equal rights for religious and secular education.

The final discussion of the conference was lively and fruitful, focusing on important theoretical and empirical questions and observations. First, all participants recognized the need to diversify the perspective when talking about the critical potentials of secularist practices. As evident from the papers presented, a secular practice can be also used as a critique of the secular, for example a communist funeral could be an arena for criticism to the communist state. Second, some reflected on the difficulty to define secularism and religion, asking what actually separates religion from secularity; what should we replace in religion in order to have secularity. Others speculated that some phenomena could be more fruitful, if we let their definitions open.

This notion of the different dimensions of the secular came up in all presentations. Many practices, adopted by ideological systems and used for anticlerical reasons, turned out to have great potential for criticizing the same political systems. Many actors, who considered themselves secularist, followed a religious agenda. The conference did not aim at giving definitions and ultimate answers, but at presenting the variety of historical, political, religious, economical and personal constellations, which determine our modern secular lifestyle.

Conference overview:

Introduction

Christoph Kleine (Leipzig): Welcome and Opening

Katharina Neef (Leipzig/Chemnitz): Critical Potentials of Secularist Practice

Section 1: Imagining Community – Creating Community

Chair: Stefan Avidsson (Vaxjö)

Dirk Schuster (Potsdam): On the Scientifica-

tion of Atheism in the GDR

Anja Kirsch (Basel): 19th Century Versions of the Perfect Society: Pietist and Owenite Communitarian Experiments in New Harmony

Anton Jansson (Lund): „The Purpose of Man“: Freethought and Life Reform in Sweden around 1900 before and after Ellen Key.

Johannes Gleixner (Prague): Defining a Secularist Framework in a New State: Czechoslovakian Secularisms 1918-1921

Keynote

Horst Junginger (Leipzig): The Study and the Critique of Religion

Section 2: Secularist Practices

Chair: Uta Karstein (Leipzig)

Daniel Laqua (Newcastle): The Invention of an International Tradition among Free-thinkers' Organizations

Thomas Schmidt-Lux (Leipzig): A Modern Architecture to Praise Secularity

Section 3: Rites de passage: Performing biographical stages in the secularist milieu

Chair: Bernadett Bigalke (Leipzig)

Antoine Mandret-Delegh (Toulouse/Paris): The Reception of the Civil Baptism in France

Jenny Vorpahl (Potsdam): Establishing and Criticizing the Civil Marriage in the GDR

Carolin Kosuch (Rome/Göttingen): Cremation. A Lasting Protest Against Christian Culture?

Heléna Tóth (Bamberg): Secular Funerals: The Dilemmas of Socialist Secularism in the GDR

Christoph de Spiegeleer (Brussels): Challenging the Social Death System: The Development of a Secularist Funerary Culture in 19th Century Belgium

Section 4: Education and Socialization

Chair: Sabrina Weiß (Leipzig)

Christophe Verbruggen (Gent): Secularity and Religion in the Transnational Discourse of the Social Reformers

Katharina Neef (Leipzig): Religious School Education and Secularist Agency to Separate

Church and School

Stefan Schröder (Bayreuth): Humanist „Lebenskunde“ as School Subject in Germany

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