Dynamics of Social Change and Perceptions of Threat

Herausgegeben von
Ewald Frie, Thomas Kohl,
and Mischa Meier

Bedrohte Ordnungen

Mohr Siebeck

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Vorwort zur Reihe „Bedrohte Ordnungen“

Was geschieht in Gesellschaften, wenn Handlungsoptionen unsicher werden, Verhaltenserwartungen und Routinen in Frage stehen, wenn Akteure das Gefühl gewinnen, sich jetzt oder in naher Zukunft wahrscheinlich nicht mehr aufeinander verlassen zu können, wenn sie von Bedrohung reden, Gründe dafür suchen und sie meistens auch finden? Zeit ist ein knappes Gut. Emotionen treten stärker in den Vordergrund und verändern sich. Grenzen sozialer Gruppen werden fraglich. „Bedrohte Ordnungen“ tragen ein hohes Potential für schnellen sozialen Wandel in sich, das aber nicht immer wirksam werden muss.

„Bedrohte Ordnungen“ können aus Katastrophen hervorgehen. Sie können die Folge plötzlicher gesellschaftsinterner Konflikte sein. Sie können aus latenten Spannungen hervorbrechen oder die Folge einer Konkurrenz von Ordnungen sein. Verschiedene Forschungstraditionen fließen damit in Untersuchungen ein, die nicht von klassifikatorischen Begriffen wie „Aufruhr“, „Revolution“ oder „Naturkatastrophe“ ausgehen, sondern dynamische gesellschaftliche Prozesse ins Zentrum stellen, die mit der Wahrnehmung und Behauptung von Bedrohung und dem Rekurs auf Ordnung zusammenhängen.

„Bedrohte Ordnungen“ gibt es in allen Epochen der Historie und in allen Kulturen der Welt. Wirken über Zeiten und Räume hinweg ähnliche Mechanismen? Lassen sich Unterschiede typologisieren? Die Reihe „Bedrohte Ordnungen“ lädt Geschichts-, Kultur- und Sozialwissenschaftler ein, zu diesen Fragen Beiträge zu liefern. Sie ist dem DFG-geförderten Sonderforschungsbereich 923 „Bedrohte Ordnungen“ verbunden, möchte aber auch über ihn hinaus Forschungen anstoßen und dokumentieren.

Die Reihenherausgeber

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Dynamics of Social Change and Perceptions of Threat

An Introduction

Ewald Frie, Thomas Kohl and Mischa Meier

This book is about a very simple question: Why do things change at certain times and not at others? The articles assembled here approach this question from the perspective of threat. Self-alerting from within societies and social groups – that is how we define threat – opens up windows of opportunities for change (though not always the changes hoped for by those who raised the alarm in the first place). Once threatened, social orders that were previously taken for granted become visible, debatable, and therefore changeable. 'Threatened orders' thus consist of a cluster of events that have the potential to accelerate, divert, stop or reverse social change; in a nutshell: to influence the trajectory of change or to "change" change. By analyzing 'threatened orders', we hope to revive the debate about social change and offer new perspectives on the nature of classical historical events such as 'revolutions' and 'disasters'. In this very short introduction, we will explore the analytical potential of 'threatened orders' a bit further.

Social Change

Social change, defined as "significant alterations of social structure"[1], is a very broad concept. No single theory of social change exists because this would be tantamount to an all-encompassing theory of society itself.[2] Some impressive approaches to social change as a subject of inquiry were developed in the 1960s and 1970s based on ideas about modernization, development, transformation and evolution.[3] Yet these concepts have been criticized in myriad ways ever since they first appeared. Objections have been raised, for example, against (1) the implicit antagonism between stability and change and sometimes the implicit preference

[1] Wilbert E. Moore 1967, quoted by *Waltraud Schelkle / Wolf-Hagen Krauth*, Introduction. Paradigms Lost and Found, in: Waltraud Schelkle / Wolf-Hagen Krauth / Martin Kohli et al. (Eds.), Paradigms of Social Change. Modernization, Development, Transformation, Evolution, Frankfurt / Main / New York 2000, 11–30, here 14.

[2] Cf. *Günter Endruweit*, Wandel, sozialer, in: Id. / Gisela Trommsdorff (Eds.),Wörterbuch der Soziologie, Vol. 3, Stuttgart 1989, 798–805, here 803.

[3] Cf. *Schelkle / Krauth*, Introduction.

for stability over change; (2) the rather static conceptualization of society as subdivided into sectors (politics, economy, culture, etc.) with stable development trajectories within each of the sectors and desirable connections between them; (3) the implicit antagonism between tradition and modernity, and the lumping together of all sorts of societies under the label 'traditional', whereas modernity is more or less defined by a western paradigm; (4) the preference for pointing to socioeconomic structures as the backbone of societies, effectively relegating factors such as politics and culture to being derivatives thereof.

After decades of criticism, this idea of 'social change' is still very much alive, but it seems to have lost its conceptual framework. Many publications employ 'social change' to indicate an interest in significant alterations in the social sphere, but they do not seem to believe in its explanatory – let alone analytical – power. Social change is everywhere: in Indian cinema[4], in Reform-Era China[5], and in social relations in late Antiquity[6] or early modern England.[7] But it means different things in different fields and to different scholars. Social change, Hans-Peter Müller and Michael Schmid have stated somewhat ironically, "still exists in society, but hardly in sociology".[8]

The ways in which social change is commonly used as a signifier attest to its versatility in space and time. Not only can it indicate shifts in cultural patterns or social structures on a macro-level, but also it can refer to changes in institutions and organizations on a meso-level. Likewise, it can describe micro-variations in biographies, social settings and situation-to-situation sequences. Despite what theories of modernization or evolution would suggest, social change does not necessarily imply an ongoing and stable process; rather, it is marked by accelerations and discontinuities as well as by aberrations and new beginnings. In order to develop a theoretical framework based on such observations, we need to address some key questions: Although change seems to happen all the time, how and why does change accelerate or stop? How is it transported across levels, sectors and spaces? What makes change change? It seems rather unlikely that the ideas about social change developed in the 1960s and 1970s with their notions

[4] *Rukmini Kakot*, Interrogating Social Change – The Cinematic Representation of Hybrid Identity Formations, in: N. William Singh Malsawmdawngliana / Saichampuii Sailo (Eds.), Becoming Something Else. Society and Change in India's North East, Cambridge 2015, 81–94.

[5] *Cao Tianyu* (Ed.), Culture and Social Transformations. Theoretical Framework and Chinese Context, Leiden / Boston 2014.

[6] *Allen E. Jones*, Social Mobility in Late Antique Gaul. Strategies and Opportunities for the Non-Elite, Cambridge 2009; *Alexande Skinner*, Political Mobility in the Later Roman Empire, in: Past & Present 218, 2013, 17–53.

[7] *Steve Hindle / Alexandra Shepard / John Walter* (Eds.), Remaking English Society. Social Relations and Social Change in Early Modern England, Woodbridge 2013.

[8] *Hans-Peter Müller / Michael Schmid*, Paradigm lost? Von der Theorie sozialen Wandels zur Theorie dynamischer Systeme, in: Id. (Eds.), Sozialer Wandel. Modellbildung und theoretische Ansätze, Frankfurt / Main 1995, 9–55, here 26. *Benjamin Steiner*, Nebenfolgen in der Geschichte. Eine historische Soziologie reflexiver Modernisierung, Berlin / Boston 2015.

of modernization, development, transformation and evolution can explain the versatility inherent within social change that is only just hinted at by posing these questions.

Events

Perhaps the best way to get at an answer to these questions is to look at events. Events are compressed happenings. A lot is done, lived through, observed and narrated in a short period of time in a compact space.[9] Events, however, are not fixed and unchangeable phenomena because they are subject to interpretation and can therefore change accordingly. In negotiating the meaning of an event, actors discuss the ordinary and the extraordinary alongside the old and the new. Drawing on their fears and fantasies, they try to make sense of what is happening according to their existing ways of understanding the world, and they evaluate the potential for change. As part of this process of coming to terms with the meaning of events, actors bridge gaps between levels, sectors and spaces. They can then use these interpretations to legitimize or criticize new kinds of change that might have been sparked by a particular event.

Contemporaries and historians alike have singled out some events as having a special capacity for change, such as revolutions, disasters and crises. Interestingly, however, the conceptualization of these terms has suffered a fate similar to that of social change. Revolutions, for example, were a popular research topic in the 1970s thanks to the path-breaking works of Theda Skocpol[10] and Charles Tilly.[11] But what Skocpol once sharply defined as "rapid, basic transformations of a society's state and class structures; […] accompanied and in part carried through by class-based revolts from below" has become a more elastic concept. We no longer think about 'state and class structures' as *the* fundamental basis of societies, for example. Likewise, revolts are no longer seen as necessarily 'class-based', nor do we cite rapidity and radicalism as essential features of revolutions.[12]

Just like 'social change', the term 'revolution' has been used in manifold, often metaphorical ways over the last few decades. Several authors have re-conceptualized the idea of revolution in an attempt to regain clarity and consensus. Yet

[9] Cf. *Rudolf Schlögl*, Kommunikation und Vergesellschaftung unter Anwesenden. Formen des Sozialen und ihre Transformation in der Frühen Neuzeit, in: Geschichte und Gesellschaft 34, 2008, 155–224, at 199.

[10] Cf. *Theda Skocpol*, States and Social Revolutions. A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China, Cambridge 1979.

[11] Cf. *Charles Tilly*, From Mobilization to Revolution, Reading 1978; Id., European Revolutions 1492–1992, Oxford 1993.

[12] *Arne Hordt / Thomas Kohl / Beatrice von Lüpke et al.*, Aufruhr! Zur epochenübergreifenden Beschreibung beschleunigten sozialen Wandels in Krisenzeiten, in: Historische Zeitschrift 301, 2015, 31–62.

others like Arne Hordt et al. propose moving away from this term altogether, especially since it is an essentially European concept that is tightly bound up with modernity. They prefer the term 'riot' because it can be used to analyze premodern and modern as well as non-European and European events alike.[13] Not only do they claim that 'riot' is a more encompassing term, but also that it has a more coherent and concrete definition. From a different perspective, Keith Michael Baker and Dan Edelstein have suggested that revolutions should no longer be defined according to certain social, economic, political and cultural processes and features. Revolutions, they say, are better understood as scripts: "Revolutions are produced by, and in turn produce, scripts". They note that "Revolutionary scripts offer frameworks for political action. Whether they serve as models or counterexamples, they provide the outlines on which revolutionary actors can improvise. And revolutionaries, in turn, can transform the scripts they inherit." Scripts are "action frames", Baker and Edelstein contend, "providing a repertory of situations, subject positions, political options, historical narratives, and social logics invoked and enacted, adapted and extended".[14]

The terms 'disaster' and 'crisis' have fared no better. Intensely debated from the 1970s (crises) and the 1990s (disasters), respectively, these terms have also lost their contours and clarity.[15] The proposal voiced by Hordt and his colleagues to replace a modern term with a more encompassing one has also been discussed with respect to 'crisis', but it seems to be more open to redefinition, despite the fact that it has historically been a modern and Western term.[16] This solution, however, leaves us with the daunting task of trying to find alternatives for those concepts that are inherently biased. The Baker/Edelstein notion of 'scripts', for example, can work for 'disasters' and 'crises'. If people label an event a 'crisis' or a 'disaster', some actions, reactions, ideas and statements are more adequate than others. The difference is not (or at least it does not have to be) in the event itself, but rather it depends on the frame in which it is embedded. The events themselves – whether they are called a revolution, crisis or disaster – have some characteristic features in common: time compression and a search for quick remedies; the mobilization of people and resources; emotional reconfiguration;

[13] *Hordt/Kohl/von Lüpke*, Aufruhr, 31–62.

[14] *Keith Michael Baker/Dan Edelstein*, Introduction, in: Id. (Eds.), Scripting Revolution. A Historical Approach to the Comparative Study of Revolutions, Stanford 2015, 1–24, here 21, 2 and 4.

[15] *Ewald Frie/Mischa Meier*, Bedrohte Ordnungen. Gesellschaften unter Stress im Vergleich, in: Id. (Eds.), Aufruhr – Katastrophe – Konkurrenz – Zerfall. Bedrohte Ordnungen als Thema der Kulturwissenschaften, Tübingen 2014, 1–27, see 7–16; *Ewald Frie*, Bedrohte Ordnungen zwischen Vormoderne und Moderne. Überlegungen zu einem Forschungsprojekt, in: Klaus Ridder/Steffen Patzold (Eds.), Die Aktualität der Vormoderne. Epochenentwürfe zwischen Alterität und Kontinuität, Berlin 2013, 99–109.

[16] *Thomas Mergel*, Einleitung. Krisen als Wahrnehmungsphänomene, in: Id. (Ed.), Krisen verstehen. Historische und kulturwissenschaftliche Annäherungen, Frankfurt/Main 2012, 9–22.

processes of social inclusion and exclusion; and debates about the self, the community and the others. Of course, such framing is not entirely arbitrary, although most 'revolutions' have been called 'disasters' by some counter-revolutionaries, and calling a 'crisis' a 'revolution' forces contemporaries to take sides.[17]

Our approach to 'threatened order and social change' begins with the characteristic features that events have once they develop the potential to change change. By finding this new common ground, we are taking up with what Elizabeth Clemens has recently called "the most striking shift" in historical sociology "from the imagery of systems and crises, which highlighted revolution and state-building, to multidimensional understandings of emergence and destabilization". History is about "a continual process of ordering and reordering, of structuration … This theoretical orientation problematize[s] not only change but also reproduction or durability."[18] The challenge is "to explain how social orders form, change, proliferate, and decline". We try to "identify those categories of cases or classes of episodes that capture the intrinsically historical dimensions of social change and reproduction". We find these episodes in events that have been labeled revolutions, riots, crises, disasters and the like, but our focus is on their common features. And this is why we call them 'threatened orders'.

Threatened Orders

'Threatened orders' appear when actors are no longer certain that they can still rely on existing expectations. Normally, knowledge about structures, behavioral expectations, routines and trust allow participants to predict the way situations should evolve and actions should unfold. Threats change these constellations. Unsettled by self-alerts coming from within these orders, actors begin to expect that their options will become unclear and the applicability of their routines will be called into question; they also begin to doubt the reliability of those with whom they interact. In order to deal with this uncertainty, they establish modes of communication in which more general forms of insecurity are linked to sources of threat that can be identified concretely. This communication is infused with strong emotions, and its messages tend to cast a shadow over other topics because of the pressing urgency of the time factor. Emotional changes, temporal compression and communicative hegemony result in new ways of evaluating and describing situations. In turn, this makes room for new possibilities. 'Threatened orders' are moments in which the historical process becomes more malleable

[17] *Neithard Bulst / Jörg Fisch / Reinhart Koselleck / Christian Meier*, Art. 'Revolution. Rebellion, Aufruhr, Bürgerkrieg', in: Otto Brunner / Werner Conze / Reinhart Koselleck (Eds.), Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe Vol. 5, Stuttgart 1984, 653–788, at 749.

[18] *Elisabeth S. Clemens*, Towards a Historicized Sociology. Theorizing Events, Processes, and Emergence, in: Annual Review of Sociology 33, 2007, 527–549, here 529 and 532.

and new actors appear; new ideas gain importance, and it becomes possible to 'write' new scripts.[19]

'Threatened orders' not only spur threat communication, but also specific kinds of threat action. Disquieted by self-alerting within existing orders, people act in new ways in the face of great pressure and emotional changes. Those unsettled by all of this form new "communication communities"[20] as well as communities of action. They rely more heavily on people and concepts that they still trust as opposed to rules and rituals that appear to be breaking down. Feeling threatened, "participants of social situations predominantly attend to one another's position, status, membership, reputation and social capital. In responding to disruptiveness, people coordinate activities and expectations in a largely relational manner. This implies a relative neglect of, and comparative inattention to, cognitive and normative expectations and respective forms of coordination, and therefore to information, competence and cultural capital, as well as a relative neglect of norms, customs and morality".[21] At least initially, it seems that the trust in orders is replaced by a trust in people. On the basis of these personal relationships, specific forms of threat communication and threat action can lead to re-ordering, which then produces orders that can once again be perceived as reliable by the actors involved.

We have developed a model that seeks to describe this re-ordering process that occurs within 'threatened orders'.[22] Re-ordering, we posit, can be understood as the interplay of threat diagnoses, the measures taken to overcome threat, mobilization and reflection. Threat diagnoses open the door for 're-ordering' as actors identify (supposed) threats and ask themselves a fundamental question: Who or what threatens us? The answers to these questions, which are part of an increasingly hegemonic threat communication[23], draw on experiences and lump them together with what is currently experienced as threatening. In turn, this produces scenarios about the near future that then demand action. Usually, several threat diagnoses compete with each other, resulting in conflicts over which one is the 'right' one. These disagreements play out quickly and intensively because all of

[19] See *Ewald Frie / Boris Nieswand*, "Bedrohte Ordnungen" als Thema der Kulturwissenschaften. Zwölf Thesen zur Begründung eines Forschungsbereichs, in: Journal of Modern European History 15, 2017, 5–15.

[20] *Hansjörg Siegenthaler*, Regelvertrauen, Prosperität und Krisen. Konjunkturgeschichte als Gegenstand der Wirtschafts- und Mentalitätsgeschichte, in: Thomas David (Ed.), Krisen. Ursachen, Deutungen und Folgen, (Schweizerisches Jahrbuch für Wirtschafts- und Sozialgeschichte 27), Zürich 2012, 31–44, here 39.

[21] *Hendrik Vollmer*, The Sociology of Disruption, Disaster and Social Change. Punctuated Cooperation, Cambridge 2013, 204.

[22] See *Frie / Nieswand*, Bedrohte Ordnungen.

[23] *Fabian Fechner / Tanja Granzow / Jacek Klimek* et al., 'We are Gambling with our survival.' Bedrohungskommunikation als Indikator für bedrohte Ordnungen, in: Ewald Frie / Mischa Meier (Eds.), Aufruhr – Katastrophe – Konkurrenz – Zerfall. Bedrohte Ordnungen als Thema der Kulturwissenschaften, Tübingen 2014, 141–173.

the actors in 'threatened orders' agree that time is of the essence and immediate action is necessary. Power in its various forms also plays a role, yet the acceptance of a diagnosis is not just about power. Because the matter at hand is an existential one, much consideration is also given to factors such as tradition, knowledge and trust, not to mention the evidence collected through different techniques of observation, description and classification.

Threat diagnoses demand action in the form of some kind of praxis. Actors ask themselves: What should or can we do in order to fight off the threat? Given the lack of time, however, action has to be taken without having collected sufficient information beforehand. This action then takes place within a social space populated by emotionalized people, living beings, machines and things of all kinds that is structured by technologies and knowledge that are not available to all actors. It is therefore not very surprising that the success of a given practice does not usually live up to the expectations of the threat diagnosticians. Such failures then change these diagnoses, which in turn leads to a new, but not necessarily more successful, praxis, which then demands new diagnoses, and the process keeps going. There is a constant interplay of diagnosis and praxis. Normally, however, a threat does not come to an end through the decisive success of a practice that completely overcomes the threat; rather, it is often the case that the intensity of this interplay between diagnosis and practice gradually fades. Indeed, as Siegenthaler has pointed out, it is quite possible that the solution to the problem is a non-intended consequence of individual or collection action undertaken by actors who were not really aware of the situation themselves.[24]

The outcome of this interplay between diagnosis and praxis is heavily dependent on two ancillary processes: the mobilization of people and resources, and the reflection about an order and its actors or participants that are supposed to be protected against a threat or changed by it. People and resources are drawn into a threat situation through mobilization. Actors find themselves facing the question of how to activate the support necessary to defer a threat and where to find the resources to do so. Mobilization, like threat diagnosis, is bound up within questions of power. Sometimes power can rest on physical violence and force. Yet it can also come from other sources of authority – whether it be of a charismatic, traditional or legal nature – that bestow the power to define and encourage abstaining from the use of violence and force.

Reflection, on the other hand, refers to the conscious act of thinking about the order that has been identified as being under threat. People ask themselves: Who or what are we in the face of this threat? In the moment of threat, people can become more conscious of elements of an order that otherwise lurk in the background, behind the backs of actors where they can exert influence but escape reflection. They become more conscious of themselves as embedded within an

[24] *Siegenthaler*, Regelvertrauen, 38.

order, which in turn opens their eyes to possibilities for change that previously went unseen. At the same time, however, some elements continue to remain hidden. Consequently, reflection can lead to changed threat diagnoses and praxes that do not necessarily function better than those that were chosen in the first place.

Threatened Orders and Social Change

Based on what we have outlined so far, the simple question posed in this book – why do things change at certain times and not at others? – needs to be answered by looking at the condensed webs of correlations surrounding events. According to pre-existing scripts, events with the potential to change change are classified as revolutions, disasters, crises and the like, all of which share common features as 'threatened orders'. Actors in these situations, having been alerted from within societies or social groups, engage in re-ordering in an effort to right what seems to be out of joint. By understanding and communicating events, they give meaning to local and situational settings while connecting the micro-, meso- and macro-levels. This is one reason why micro-evidence is of high value to scholars investigating threatened orders and social change.[25] Events compress and condense the ongoing process of change, which entails the ordering and re-ordering of the world around us in social, discursive and material terms.[26] Not only that, but they also have the potential to divert or redirect the trajectory of change.

Given that the experience of threat as well as the clustering of happenings into events is something common to all humans, 'threatened orders' can be detected and analyzed in all human societies. What differs between societies are the conditions under which self-altering and re-ordering unfold. This means that the concept of 'threatened orders' can be used to make comparisons that stretch across the usual temporal borders between the pre-modern and modern world as well as the spatial borders between Western and non-Western societies. Such an analysis also allows for a discourse on the similarities and differences in changing change that crosses the lines that are typically drawn between academic disciplines and historical periods.

This book is divided into five sections that look at this relationship between 'threatened orders' and social change. Each of them has a thematic, spatial and

[25] *Hendrik Vollmer*, The Sociology of Disruption, Disaster and Social Change. Punctuated Cooperation, Cambridge 2013, 236; *Andreas Ziemann*, Soziologische Strukturlogiken der Situation, in: Id. (Ed.), Offene Ordnung? Philosophie und Soziologie der Situation, Wiesbaden 2013, 105–129.

[26] *Stefan Beck/Michi Knecht*, Jenseits des Dualismus von Wandel und Persistenz? Krisenbegriffe der Sozial- und Kulturanthropologie, in: Thomas Mergel (Ed.), Krisen verstehen. Historische und kulturwissenschaftliche Annäherungen, Frankfurt/Main 2012, 59–81, here 72–73.

temporal focus. Although they vary according to the authors, the introductions to each section highlight the correlations between the individual texts. Taken together, these chapters thus allow for a comparison across the times and places that are covered in different sections. Using current events, the first section examines the way in which group mobilization or the formation of groups as a type of threat response is shaped by collective action frames that are specific to a given order and are therefore difficult to transfer across space and time. By looking at riots in medieval European cities, the second section explores the complex nexus between seemingly spontaneous riots, power issues, rivaling interpretations of social order and processes of social change. The third section deals with systems of belief in Ancient Europe that seem to have been permanent and inalterable in that they gave meaning to ever-changing events and circumstances. Yet, as this section shows, this symbolic order was certainly not left untouched by social changes. The fourth section delves deep into European and Australian disasters of the nineteenth and nineteenth centuries to better differentiate forces of continuity and change in the wake of these dramatic events. And, finally, the last section concentrates on the period around 1800 in Europe in order to investigate how changing concepts of the future enabled actors to overcome threats.

The goal of this volume is to foster and stimulate comparisons across the different sections. It seeks to use 'threatened orders' as a key to unlock the door to an interdisciplinary discussion that escapes the confines of historical periodization.

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(by Hans-Peter Nill / Manuela Mann)

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