Post-doctoral thesis outline
Sociological Faculty, University of Bielefeld, spring 2006

Social life from the state of exception: Organizations on battlefields

The state of exception has recently become one of the most prominent topics in political discourse. In political theory and philosophy, works like Giorgio Agamben's widely discussed "Homo Sacer" (Agamben 1998) have been revitalizing interest in more classical treatments of the state of exception like Carl Schmitt's theory of sovereignty (Schmitt 1985). These works claim the state of exception to be the fundamental basis on which political order is built, while itself defining a suspension of order, revealing - if not institutionalizing - the power of a sovereign to offset or reinstate it. In particular, Agamben has generalized this claim by presuming the state of exception not only to uncover the sovereign power behind political order, but also to have become the paradigm of its contemporary maintenance. Political order is taken to be reproduced through its state of exception - a perception which for many observers has been dramatically reinforced by recent political conflicts and crises.

At this time, sociological research must appear ill-suited to comment on such issues through its own devices. Despite its long-standing and mostly methodologically motivated interest in "situations, where the established modes of daily life are drastically undermined or shattered" (Giddens 1984: 60), sociology has not deemed the state of exception itself to be a theoretical and empirical issue worthy of systematic study. To establish the state of exception as a substantial theoretical and empirical domain of sociological research is the most general aim of the present project. To achieve this aim, the project will put in place some preliminary sociological theory and subsequently try elaborate it by drawing on historical case material. The theoretical portion of the study will reformulate the state of exception as involving a particular transformation of social situations. Empirical material will be mobilized from sociological and historiographic studies of military organizations in battle. On a methodological level, the general bearing of this investigation is to generate qualitative hypotheses which further studies will be able to submit to more rigorous forms of testing.
Exceptional situations

In contrast to the bulk of political and mass media discourse, a sociological approach to the state of exception will at first need to deconstruct the idea that this state can be comprehensively defined by deviations of events from abstract, ideal or moral standards. As a condition of social life, the state of exception can only be understood within and not against the terms of a social setting in which it takes place. Any standard against which a social situation might appear exceptional therefore needs be made an object of the same kind of analytical scrutiny as the deviant set of events itself. It is through reference to the understanding of situational proprieties and proprieties among empirical sets of participants, and in proportion to structural and cultural repertoires these participants draw upon in ordering activity that particular social situations acquire an exceptional quality. A state of exception then is not brought about by an accidental unfolding of events external to a social order exposed to them, but by settings, participants and socio-cultural requisites somehow coming to be at odds with the present demands of a social situation.

In social situations, encounters and gatherings, participants draw on repertoires of routines and other cultural tools for bringing ongoing activity into line with what they consider to be unproblematic and safe ways of conducting themselves and others. Such bringing-into-line is often of ritualistic character (Goffman 1971: 88-123), but it does not mechanically squeeze activity into confirmation of pre-given norms and standards. It usually involves protracted negotiations among participants in establishing a working consensus about how a situation is to be defined and enacted (Goffman 1959: 20-22). The attitude of daily life predicating such negotiations is based on a cognitive style of experience and conduct in which participants rather quickly adapt to variable aspects of ongoing activities (Schütz 1971: 230-231). Everyday expectations participants bring to bear onto situations, and which define for them acceptable degrees of normality and safety, operate under an "et cetera" clause, turning situations into instances of more general classes of events and interactions through active processes of interpreting what is going on (Garfinkel 1967: 67). An exceptional situation occurs in cases in which there is a failure of such collective sensemaking, in which a working consensus regarding the current situation, producing a level of normality, of safety and orientation for ongoing conduct, temporarily fails to materialize. The present project will approach the state of exception as a passing of social life through exceptional situations in this sense.

A by now classical treatment of exceptional situations can be found in Harold Garfinkel's "Studies in Ethnomethodology" (Garfinkel 1967). Garfinkel fabricated exceptional situations by intentionally breaching "background expectancies" of participants within experimental settings (Garfinkel 1967: 36-37), and found confusion and anxiety to result among his subjects (Garfinkel 1967: 58-65). The degree of anxiety experienced by participants varied according to how strongly they had been subscribing to the beliefs and expectations of normality that were experimentally frustrated (Garfinkel 1967: 65-67). Garfinkel's findings thus bring out participants' expectations as crucial variables for understanding how exceptional situations come into being. His findings also indicate breaching expectations immediately induces efforts of participants to dissolve the dissonance between expectations and events. Also, participants' expectations might gradually be transformed, but Garfinkel did not design his experiments to observe any re-learning of expectations among participants which might in such cases result.
Yet change in expectations might indeed be likely if a working definition of a situation continuously failed to emerge and interpretations based on prior expectations were consistently being frustrated. Would participants not come up with new working definitions of what is going on once ongoing events and activities continued to resist being brought into line with what had been considered normal? Would participants not begin to settle on new plains of normality better suited to make events surrender to interpretation and control, thus generating a new set of future "background expectancies"? If expectations might be regarded as elements of a more general understanding of order which transcends the singularity of social situations - and Garfinkel, despite his focus on situated activity, appears to imply this when locating expectations in a "background" - the interplay between exceptional situations and the broader social order (organizations, cultures, society etc.) in which they occur becomes a central issue. How can a state of exception that is situated within a distinct and limited social situation, constituted by events which naturally expire and vanish all by themselves, confronted by participants whose co-presence is only temporary, affect specifications of social order that transcend the singularity of social situations, their expiry dates and sets of participants?

To come to terms with this more general theoretical issue, a notion of social order needs to be mobilized that is sensitive to problems of maintaining order over time in the face of adverse events and exceptional situations. As a consequence, understanding expectations as critical factors in the empirical development of exceptional situations turns out to involve a most critical piece of sociological theory. The theoretical framework of this project is built on the assumption that within a longitudinal perspective any change in expectations arising from exceptional situations might be analyzed as a structural effect on a social order going through a state of exception. To bring this structural effect into focus, the maintenance of social order needs to be related to the generation, maintenance and change of expectations. To this end, Niklas Luhmann's notion of structure is adopted and, to some extent, calibrated (Luhmann 1995: 303-307).

What Garfinkel terms the "et cetera" clause of background expectancies (Garfinkel 1967: 73-74), Luhmann understands to result from generalizations of meaning (Luhmann 1995: 326-328). Luhmann distinguishes three dimensions of meaning: a factual, a temporal, and a social dimension (cf. Luhmann 1995: 75). This provides a useful bearing for differentiating ways of forming expectations and of translating expectations into more explicit forms of social structure. One way is generalizing from the factual meaning of ongoing activity (What is going on?), by which expectations can be translated into and gradually become objectified as interpretive knowledge (Luhmann 1995: 328). Another way is bringing ongoing activity into line with previous specifications (What should be going on?), which reinforces the temporal resilience of expectations, and might gradually turn expectations into norms (Luhmann 1995: 292, 330-332). Still another way is generalizing meaning of ongoing activity in its social (i.e. relational) dimension. This specific possibility is not given systematic recognition by Luhmann, but a respective piece of theory can be supplemented by drawing on notions of social structure provided by network analysis (e.g. Wellman 1988; White 1992). By framing activity in terms of the relations and positions occupied by participants with respect to one another (Who is
involving who in ongoing activity?), participants can attribute and address expectations to others and themselves, translating expectations into relationships or networks.

Interpretive knowledge, norms and social relations can then be analyzed as three distinct forms of deriving order from the formation of expectations. While these forms often come to reinforce each other and extensively intermingle empirically (knowledge about norms, norms regulating relationships etc.), they can be stringently differentiated with respect to what way of generalizing meaning is taking guidance in deriving social structure from expectations. Most clearly, this is evident in the event of changing expectations, since each structural derivative equips participants with distinct forms of responsiveness to unfolding events and activities in social situations, and with some clue as to when expectations might need to be reconsidered: on the basis of testing interpretations (interpretive knowledge), on a re-evaluation of standards (norms), or on the basis of repeated contacts and reiterated taking of positions (relationships and networks). In relating exceptional situations to the maintenance of social order, this project aims to investigate how exceptional situations disrupt or foster, activate or de-activate distinct forms of generating and maintaining expectations and social structure, which systematic asymmetries can be observed across the forms, and what social dynamics these asymmetries might be grounded in.

In a provisional summary of the theoretical approach, the state of exception may be defined by a precariously dynamic interplay of situational (events, participants) and trans-situational (expectations and their structural sediments) variables in the maintenance of social order. In contrast to political (and legal) discourse, the sociological interest in the state of exception will then need to be motivated more by looking for dynamic adaptation and change of social order arising from its temporal continuation rather than aiming to explain the maintenance of order with reference to what is understood to lie conspicuously beyond it (as political theorists like Schmitt and Agamben would suggest). In theoretically differentiating various forms of generating, sustaining, and rearranging order in social situations, by focussing on how structure is lost or gained through grooming expectations, the analytical framework of this project is geared towards not only observing momentary disruptions of order in exceptional situations, but towards tracking more subtle processes of rearranging order, of investigating breaches of order as well as more nuanced structural drifts.

1 Frames and frameworks are perhaps most prominent sociological terms to describe such aggregate compounds of generalized meaning (e.g. Goffman 1974: 10-11).
The vulnerabilities of organized social life

The problem with current sociological knowledge about the state of exception is not that empirical data are generally amiss. Available data have been insufficiently accumulated and systematized. This study will use a strategic selection of available empirical data and try to mobilize productively some of the theoretical considerations and hypotheses previous studies of exceptional situations have brought to bear on them. Many empirical studies of accidents and disasters have been using formal organizations as units of study. These studies developed numerous hypotheses about how sets of events and participants getting out of control interact with more prevailing aspects of organized social orders, and their hypotheses serve well to calibrate a more narrowly defined empirical focus.

To begin with, social situations which happen in organized social settings and environments are not fundamentally different from other social situations. Like all social situations, organized situations bring together participants in a dynamic confrontation of events, activities and expectations. Empirical differences between organized and other kinds of social situations, on the other hand, result from the degree of command executed by organizations over the expectations brought to bear on events by participants. Membership is the prime lever of organizational command over expectations, binding participants to specific roles, to occupying specific positions, to performing prescribed tasks, all to be triggered by specifically designated settings and events (e.g. Coleman 1990: 426-450). Though organizational command over expectations is never complete and seldom suffices to define situational normalities anywhere near exhaustively, it results in vulnerabilities of social situations which are specific to social settings which are to some extent organized.

On the one hand, organizations severely restrict their members' abilities to disattend disruptive events which organizations define as demanding repair. Organizations generate a receptiveness to disruptive events which are unlikely to ever happen and - if they did happen - were likely to be disattended in non-organized instances of everyday life. Organizational settings of behavior might be seen as socio-spatial arrangements for the systematic and formally enforced exposure of participants to improbable classes of events which only make sense within frameworks of experience defined by organizations. In fact, organizations often bring about events and activities utterly incomprehensible to participants outside of minute, segregated or classified portions of organizational framings. The likelihood of such mismatching confrontations within organizations increases as a correlate of their internal complexity and differentiation, and particularly with rising operational interdependence of organizational elements (Perrow 1984).

Still, on the other hand, in organized social settings a specific kind of ignorance emerges towards those events which members of organizations are formally allowed to disattend. This ignorance produces a vulnerability to disruptive events (if of organizational making or not) which are being noticed only after having reached a stage at which disattention cannot any longer be upheld, i. e. once drastic, incontrovertible damages have already been incurred (Turner 1976: 388-393). Although most organizational programming of expectations superficially appears - or explicitly claims - to make social situations more predictable, it produces vulnerabilities of social life to hazardous confrontations of participants and events which are motivated, but not effectively controlled by organizations.
Organizations under stress

In line with these observations, one review of the "dark side of organizations" concludes that "the same aspects of organizations that contribute to the bright side also contribute to the dark side" (Vaughan 1999: 296). But how do organizations and their members cope with situations which they have recognized as being disruptive and in need of immediate attention? Numerous studies about organizational stress, accidents and disasters have been analyzing organized social settings in which the capacity of participants to maintain orderly conduct is severely strained or incapacitated. The diagnoses generally appear to fall into two distinct and, to some extent, opposing categories. One set of studies claims organizations to develop a kind of structural numbness, the other set identifies newly emergent structures allowing participants to effectively cope with the demands of unforeseen events.

Representative for the first set of studies is the formulation of the "threat-rigidity thesis" by Staw and his colleagues (Staw et al. 1981). Behaving rigidly in threatening situations is seen as a behavioral tendency of individuals, groups and organizations alike, producing two general kinds of general effects: restrictions of information processing and constrictions of control (Staw et al. 1981: 502). For organizations, restrictions of information processing results in a simplification of communication which increasingly focusses on registering and distributing information consonant with established organizational frameworks (Staw et al. 1981: 512-513). Constriction of control brings about centralization of authority, strengthening of tightly coupled and dissolution of weak ties, as well as fortification of known ways of containing events and activities (Staw et al. 1981: 513-515). Such rigidity effects in organizations trying to come to terms with exceptional situations resonate well with various sets of empirical data about collective decision-making, like the findings presented in Janis' famous study about groupthink (Janis 1972), which have analogically been observed in various contexts of organizational stress like disasters (Weick 1990) or downsizing (Shaw/Barrett-Power 1997: 115-116).

For the second set of findings, a classic study by Brouillette and Quarantelli (1971) about debureaucratization may be seen as paradigmatic. Rather than clutching at established frameworks, rules and forms of conduct, organizations under stress are seen to shift responsibilities, develop new structures and define new tasks (Brouillette/Quarantelli 1971: 40-41). Typical sequences of organizational adaptations may be seen as coping trials until structures have been established which allow organizations to effectively regain control of what is going on (Brouillette/Quarantelli 1971: 42-43). This focus on emergent structure has become particularly prominent in sociological studies of disasters, which have steadily been criticizing command-and-control approaches to emergency management (Drabek/McEntire 2002: 202-203), calling for a kind of disaster response which is able to make use of emergent groups, structures and norms (Neal/Philips 1995: 334-5) - "(...) the ad hoc, organic, emergent organization is not an aberration to be avoided; it may actually be the optimal organizational form for the response to a complex event in a turbulent and hostile environment" (Harrald et al. 1992: 211). While threat-rigidity effects are recognized by these studies as behavioral obstacles for organizations trying to prevail in hostile or disruptive environments (a recognition which then translates into calls for emergency management reform), new forms of structure are assumed to spontaneously emerge once established ways of maintaining order have collapsed.
To what degree do organizations then in effect restrain participants confronting exceptional situations from spontaneously adapting? Rather than coming up with a definitive general answer to this question, studies of organizations under stress have been in various forms reposing the question how situational and trans-situational variables interact in exceptional situations, and in what way this interaction affects the maintenance of social order. Two general observations make organizations good empirical objects to study this kind of interaction: organizations produce vulnerabilities of social life which they systematically impose upon distinct sets of participants; organizations put in place expectations by formal structures which work as guidelines for conduct and experience, without per se precluding adaptations. Organized social setting thus appear as a promising empirical focus for studying how situated and temporally confined exceptional situations affect social orders in which they are embedded.

Organizations in battle

The present project will concentrate on a set of organizations particularly exposed to exceptional situations: military organizations on battlefields. Despite some interesting material about mishaps and malfunctions of military performance on contemporary battlefields ("friendly fire", "fog of war", etc.; e.g. Snook 2000), the empirical case studies to be mobilized here will mainly cover episodes from the First and Second World War, to which some comparative material will punctually be added. This kind of empirical material bears the advantage of allowing for more extensive historiographic cross-reading of accounts and also for some longer-term evaluation of military organizations and their structural changes during the first half of the twentieth century, which will be essential in elaborating an understanding of the traces left by states of exception inside their host social orders. This kind of material also allows for some speculation about repercussions in larger organizational and institutional fields, if not in society per se, e.g. in reorganizations of wartime economies brought about by disruptions in military logistics (cf. Baron et al. 1986).

In order to understand how military organizations in battle expose their members to exceptional situations, an appraisal of the basic requirements of and special demands placed on and incorporated in military organization is inexpendable. High-risk environments which persistently threaten the life of participants from which extreme and highly specified forms of anti-social behavior are demanded would in themselves constitute exceptional behavioral burdens for most social settings, including organized ones, but will need to be considered normal operating requirements for military organizations. Regularly, especially once military organizations draw extensively on non-voluntary and more or less ad hoc forms of membership, these requirements can be found to be empirically frustrated. It is in the context of informal truces (Ashworth 1968), military failures (Cohen/Gooch 1991), or in degenerating forms of violence and killing (Bartov 1986), that this study will find instructive case material. For a large proportion of military participants in the World Wars though, some degree of exposure to exceptional situations can more generally be taken for granted, even if no event qualifying as a military failure or disaster in fact occurred to them, since most participants were mobilized from settings of everyday life hardly preparing them for the kind of experience they were to be thrown into, for which
they received little training, with what they received of doubtful serviceability (Marshall 2000: 36-49).

While an understanding of normal military organization is a prerequisite for identifying exceptional situations, battlefields then are to be investigated not in terms of their operational ideals, but in terms of the actual experiences and activities of participants trying to cope with situations which for them are life-threatening, unpredictable, disorienting and often confusing. In this sense, "all battles are, in some degree, and to a greater or lesser number of the combatants, disasters" (Keegan 1978: 199). Yet exceptional situations are not found on the front lines of battle alone. As many historiographic studies have shown, confusion on the battlefield can be traced on its way up the chain of command and down again to commanders at the front. The fateful dynamics of decision-making and infantry movement during the First World War are perhaps the best examples of devastating feed-back loops channelling and amplifying confusion, disruption and destruction across settings and participants (e.g. Travers 1993; Cohen/Gooch 1991: 133-163).

Most of the available literature appears to distribute its attention in observing the management of battle situations unevenly across higher and lower-ranking participants, showing peculiar differences in the respective analytical foci. Studies of "the common soldier" and his behavior in battle units tend to concentrate on relationships between participants' battle experience, demoralization and disintegration of units, or the formation of peer-relations and combat group cohesion (e. g. Shils/Janowitz 1948; Wesbrook 1980). Studies of decision-making and military leadership have, on the other hand, largely focussed on failures to learn, dogmatism and other drawbacks of military bureaucracy (Davis 1948; Snyder 1984). This might to some degree adequately mirror the differential demands military organizations appear to place on different membership classes - informed decisions and effective leadership from a privileged minority, brute force and sustained deployability from most others. But looking for use and adaptation of interpretive knowledge when judging how leaders responded to exceptional situations, as opposed to looking primarily at relational (group and peer) aspects of social structure in respective responses of lower-ranking participants, is begging the question if converse forms of coping and adaptation can empirically not be observed at all. Thus the historiographic material might to some extent need to be reinterpreted in order to fill in potentially missing dimensions of maintaining and changing expectations and respective forms of social structure across settings and participants of military activity.

Forecast

Summing up the empirical objectives of this project, it aims to identify repercussions of exceptional situations on military organizations in battle, and wishes to explore the associated dynamics of maintaining expectations and social structures, based on interpretive knowledge, norms, or social relations. These dynamics, while evolving from within military organizations and spreading among their members and across their settings, need not simply cease to exist beyond the formally defined boundaries of military organizations. Soldiers' friendship ties are an apparent example. There is then a potential
empirical significance of this kind of research transcending the sociological understanding of the military.

Wars are increasingly being recognized as major historical causes of social change (e. g. Marwick 1974; Barbera 1998). In modern warfare, in the total wars of the last century as well as in contemporary regional or "low-intensity" conflicts, battlefields may spring into being in almost every imaginable kind of social setting. These battle situations vary in their degree of organization, and clearly the military experience of war is today not the only and perhaps, regarding society as a whole, not even the single most important one. Yet military organization is so utterly demanding on society in requiring logistics, personnel, economic, cultural and organizational support, that, most apparently in the case of last century's World Wars, the dynamics of perpetuating military organizations through exceptional situations induce structural repercussions throughout society. The long-term structural externalities of operating military organizations might then well be the most consequential form of "collateral damage", inflicted for example on the political organization of society, its longer-term power over and mobilization of violence (cf. Tilly 1997).

With respect to elaborating sociological theory, the main thrust of this project is towards developing an operational understanding of social order across structural and situated aspects of its perpetuation and dynamic change. The empirical material serves as a basis for generating qualitative hypotheses which might later be submitted to more rigorous forms of empirical testing. Not at least, the state of exception appears as a crucial empirical interface of micro and macro trajectories of social order. Within the state of exception, maintaining social order and maintaining a sense of reality, disruption of social structure and disruption of personal experience, perpetuating situated social interaction, sustaining the effectiveness of organizational structure, and preserving the fabric of society are fundamentally intertwined. Working out the dynamics of such micro-macro assemblages on a qualitative level is a prerequisite for generating quantifiable hypotheses and for choosing and adequately operationalizing more robust methodologies in testing them. In conclusion, this study will formulate a respective set of hypotheses and discuss commensurate research methods.

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