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Non-Commensurable?

The Self-Comparing Subject in the Pre-Modern and Modern Ages (11th-19th Centuries)

Project in the context of special research project 1288 “Practices of Comparing”

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Individuals are commonly held to be incomparable, particularly in the modern age, but seem to be constantly compared nonetheless, in everyday life as well as in the social sciences. The practice of autobiographical writing—as is our initial hypothesis—has always been operating on the basis of this ambivalence, being founded on the attempt to emphasise both one’s own life’s uniqueness as well as its incomparability, particularly by invoking comparisons. Initially the project will analyse personal testimonials both from the 11th and 12th centuries as well as from the 19th century; first, it will ask where the comparison is situated within the autobiographic tension between uniqueness and comparability; second, it will investigate which types of comparisons emerge from the analysed personal testimonials and autobiographies; and third, it will focus on the historical changes of comparisons in the context of pre-modern and modern self-thematisation.

Two essential modes of comparison are predominant within self-descriptions: first, an author describes him/herself in comparison to other people; second, self-descriptions, somewhat paradoxically, make use of comparisons to emphasise the author’s own non-commensurability. The project asks how the analysed autobiographic texts reach back to these (and other) ways of doing comparisons, and which significance and which meaning are attributed to them in each case. At the same time, the project focuses on one crucial way of relating individuals to social groups and social orders. On the one hand, operations of comparison are—explicitly and implicitly—made by the autobiographic author relating him/herself to social classifications of the subject (class, religion, gender, nation etc.), and, on the other hand, modelled in the narrative-chronological unfolding of the author’s life (then and now, child/adult). To what extent is the way of comparing one’s self to others influenced by the individual’s changing relation to social groups and the society as a whole? Is there any specifically ‘literary form’ of doing comparisons in the context of autobiographic writing?

The project’s hypothesis is that the epochal transformations of practices of comparing emerge in a particular manner in the context of autobiographic self-thematisations. Thereby, not only do the differences between pre-modern and modern self-thematisations become visible, most notably by the respective authors placing their own selves either inside or outside societal contexts. Otherwise it might also turn out that such ambivalent (self-)localisations are orthogonal to the respective historical epochs and are connected to each other either synchronically or within the texts themselves.