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Postheroic Heroes

A Portrait of Our Era

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1. Introduction: Between Postheroism and the Return of the Hero

Writing a sociological essay about heroes – even post-heroic heroes – today requires a certain amount of justification. This is all the more the case when the essay attempts to offer an analysis of the present. We typically associate heroes with warlike and sometimes tragic figures who accomplish exceptional deeds and stand up against powerful enemies, who avert catastrophes, overcome adversity, and put themselves in danger for the sake of a good cause without a concern for rules and conventions – and who are revered and admired for all of this. Material better suited, surely, to romantic stories, military mobilization tracts, didactic literature, or the myths of popular culture than to a sociological picture of the times! Sociology, in any case, has its difficulties with heroizations: it is more interested in ordinary people than »great men«, in frequency distributions rather than singularities, and it focuses on social orders rather than on the exceptional. It is equally mistrustful of the demand for heroes and the mechanisms of their fabrication. Heroisms, for the sociologist, are always under suspicion of being tinged with ideology, or they are classified as hopelessly antiquated relics of a pre-modern, hierarchically ordered world. In any case, they would seem to be of limited use for our understanding of the present.

A diagnostic critique of an era must not only find the correct answers, it must also ask the right questions, and there are indubitably more obvious starting points for a description of contemporary societies than the crisis and change of their hero images. Even studies that problematize the heroic are in danger of perpetuating, even as they attempt to disenchant it, the

vertical conception of the world represented by heroes and heroines. In this context, Jürgen Habermas's comment that »Whenever ›heroes‹ are honored, the question arises as to who needs them and why«¹ also needs to be extended to the sociological investigation of heroes. To be sure, this also applies to the thesis that we live in a post-heroic era: for it nourishes the illusion of a peaceful, levelled-out society which does not require or create any heroes because individual greatness is considered arrogance, conflicts are worked out through communication and there is neither the will nor the ability for voluntary self-sacrifice. Here, too, we must ask: »Who needs this, and why?«

Both heroic narratives and their post-heroic disruptions are politically charged and pose questions of intention and usefulness. And herein also lies their power to shed light on the present: they can be read as illustrations of what social orders ask of their members and what they think they are capable of; what values, behavioural norms, and emotional rules they align their members towards; what agency they grant or deny them; and what imaginaries they open up. Heroes reveal the negotiation of – among other things – normative expectations and hierarchies, attitudes towards conformity and deviance, appeals to individuals and collectives, the position of the individual in a highly complex technologized society, leadership models, the problem of self-sacrifice and the accompanying attitude towards death, as well as gender roles and the importance placed on religious ties. The question of who needs hero figures and why, and who challenges this and why, is indicative not least of how crises are perceived and of the desire for normalization.

All of these topics are controversial, and for this reason there is no consensus about the value of the heroic in the present era. The starting point for the reflections laid out in this essay is thus the observation of a contradiction: on the one hand, since the 1980s the descriptor »post-heroic« has appeared in a wide variety of contexts with the claim of plausibility as a characterization of our era; on the other hand, hardly a day passes in which new heroes and heroines are not proclaimed or familiar ones revived. The weakening and the intensification of heroic energies take place in parallel with one another. Traditional areas for proving heroism become unimportant, while new heroes proliferate in zones that were previously heroless. The invocatory power of heroic narratives may diminish, but their ability to entertain seems unaffected. That which we no longer accept as binding as a model to be imitated, we seek all the more intently in the spheres of the imagination.

¹ »Fundamentalism and Terror: A Dialogue with Jürgen Habermas«, in: Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror. Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, Chicago 2003, pp. 25-43, quotation: p. 43.

The thesis that we have entered a post-heroic era is postulated, to begin with, in political and military science treatises on the future of warfare. Western societies are no longer able – so goes the theory – to mobilize a spirit of self-sacrifice on a mass level or prepared to take the risk of high losses among their own troops over a longer period of time. Consequently, they engage in asymmetrical wars with highly technical weapons systems, but thereby make themselves vulnerable to opponents who compensate for their inferior technology with a heroic contempt for death. Meanwhile, in organizational and management studies, theoreticians trumpet their models of postheroic leadership. They abandon optimistic expectations of shaping organizations through policy planning and the illusion of steering through rationalist management and instead advocate a participative leadership style based on strengthening potential for self-direction, or they argue with realistic modesty for a change of orientation from heroic problem-solving to postheroic coping. Psychological studies, in turn, identify the contemporary social character as one of the postheroic personality which buys its flexibility at the price of the compulsion of continual adaptation to accelerated social change. Even pop music is said to have entered the postheroic phase of a »counterculturalism without a counterculture«.² Further instances from other fields could be adduced indefinitely. Even though these various strands of discourse remain largely disconnected from one another, when they are considered cumulatively, a strong picture of the era emerges.

Particularly striking is the almost exclusively adjectival usage: all kinds of things are referred to as postheroic, but there is scarcely any mention of postheroes or postheroism. And like other »post-« terms that are invoked as signature characteristics of our era, this attribute is not notable for its conceptual precision. Sometimes it refers to a mentality or a habitus, other times it is a stage in the modernization process or a mode of carrying out warfare. »Postheroic« can likewise indicate an understanding of the art of government that recognizes the complexity of the social realm and therefore has discarded the hubris of aiming for technocratic control. In addition, the attribute is also affixed to attitudes and moods that view lofty and solemn invocations with aversion, that are immune to calls for self-sacrifice or unconditional identification with a cause, and can muster, at best, an ironic stance towards the veneration of great men and their deeds. Finally, postheroic is used to characterize all artefacts and cultural practices that are associated with such attitudes.

Just as talk of postmodernity doesn't equate to a farewell to modernity, the trope of the postheroic era does not indicate the end of heroic orientations, but rather that they have been

² Diedrich Diederichsen, *Über Pop-Musik*, Cologne 2014, p. 390.

problematized and become self-reflexive. The declarations of a present postheroic era refer, through their semantics, to those very hero narratives which they claim are crumbling and which they set themselves apart from. The potential of heroic appeals to integrate and mobilize is by no means exhausted. Rather, this diagnosis of heroic figures as suspect and antiquated exists alongside and in opposition to an enduring hunger for heroes that is abundantly fed. Hero figures, new and revived, populate the worlds of comics and computer games, superhero blockbusters break box office records, and competitive sports provide a constant supply of heroizable material. The firefighters of 9/11 are declared to be heroes, as are climate activists, whistleblowers, and political freedom fighters like the anonymous Tank Man who stood alone against the approaching tanks in Tiananmen Square in Beijing in 1989. What is notable about this new humanist heroism is the way that it is no longer linked to fulfilment of duty or loyalty; instead, the new heroes are characterized by nonconformity and insubordination. Heroic courage becomes civic courage. Parallel with this is a democratization and banalization of the heroic. In the end anyone can become a hero, even if »just for one day«, as David Bowie promised, or only for the brief »fifteen minutes of fame« which, Andy Warhol suggested, are available to everyone in the era of mass media.³

However, with the rise of populist leaders another heroic type is returning to the political stage: the loud-mouthed lout who takes the spotlight in order to rally the establishment to clean out the national Augean stables and lead the country to new (or former) greatness. Not a father figure who embodies the authority of the law, but the ringleader of a horde of brothers who rebels against the legally established authorities because they are not authoritarian enough for him. He invokes a violent world in which strength is all that matters and only those who show no mercy have a chance to come out ahead. To his adherents he promises not safety and prosperity, but emotional venting: whoever follows him can let out his feelings with impunity on those who are weaker. The fact that he suspends the distinction between truth and lies only underscores his will to power: by thumbing his nose at fact checking, he shows that he can reshape reality however he pleases. The theatrical self-presentation of these folk heroes includes not just the offensive display of one's own wealth and a habitus somewhere between that of a business tycoon, a people's tribune, and a military commander, but also aggressive machismo with sexualized masculine posturing meant to signal – not just to women – that the boss can do whatever he wants. These figures can hardly be dismissed as anachronisms. Their blustering

³ »We can be heroes just for one day«, Bowie proclaims in the refrain of his hit song »Heroes« (1977). »In the future, everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes«, promised Andy Warhol in 1968, in: Kasper König, Pontus Hultén, Olle Granath (eds.), *Andy Warhol: Catalogue Published on the Occasion of the Andy Warhol Exhibition at Moderna Museet in Stockholm, February-March 1968*, Stockholm 1968.

braggart's heroism, paired with threats of violence and contempt for those who are weaker, is the obverse of the anything but self-aggrandizing heroism of courageous everyday heroes.

It is in the competition between such disparate hero models and even more in the collision of heroic and post-heroic principles that the fault lines of contemporary society become visible. This essay will trace these opposing, but simultaneous processes and examine the discursive battle grounds and contact zones between the contemporary dynamics of heroization and deheroization. These include the affective, moral, legitimacy, and invocatory dimensions of hero narratives (and the price that comes with them) as well as the corresponding aspects of the relativization, criticism, and abandonment of these narratives. I thus neither adhere to the thesis that we are living in a postheroic society, nor do I reject it. Rather, I am concerned with a second-order analysis of our era that asks what we can learn about the present – which of its aspects come into focus and which ones are blanked out – when it is characterized in so many contexts as postheroic even while, at the same time, the production of heroes, and, increasingly, heroines as well, continues in overdrive (or is enjoying a renewed boom?). What challenges are contemporary heroisms a response to? What are the questions that the attribute »postheroic« is supposed to answer?

Attempts to »diagnose« an era have the reputation for overextending mere anecdotal, individual observations as the basis for a generalized characterization, for exaggerating discontinuities and suppressing the persistence of the old in the new, and for giving pithy labels preference over analytic nuance. They are considered »interesting, but nonetheless also rather unsound«.⁴ The characterization of contemporary society as postheroic, which will be given a critical examination here and diagnostically assessed in its turn, exists, in addition, only as an accumulation of largely superficial usages of this label for widely disparate contemporary phenomena. Its scope and explanatory power are still unclear.

I hope to avoid the pitfalls of sociological overgeneralization by embedding the diagnostic soundings in analytic reflections about the social figure of the hero and the driving forces behind and effects of heroizations (chapter 2). The discussion is not directed towards deriving a single theory of the heroic (that would be an impossible undertaking), but rather pieces together heterogeneous building blocks into a heuristic method that can guide a theoretical penetration of central aspects of the heroic. Following on this, the next section traces a history of ideas concerning the paradoxical relationship between hero cults and modern society in the

⁴Walter Reese-Schäfer, »Zeitdiagnose als wissenschaftliche Aufgabe«, *Berliner Journal für Soziologie* 6:3 (1996), pp. 377-390, here p. 377.

paradigmatic reflections of thinkers from Hegel to Enzensberger and simultaneously exposes the postheroic fault lines of »heroic modernity«⁵ (chapter 3). Subsequently, the analytical zoom and line of sight turn to the present in sections dedicated to discourse analysis of the social psychology of the postheroic personality (chapter 4), postheroic management (chapter 5), postheroic warfare (chapter 6), and finally a typology of the heroes and heroines that are produced and permitted within postheroic society (chapter 7). In addition to scholarly and journalistic sources, these sections draw on advice literature and other phenomena of popular culture to examine how the postheroic decentring of heroes simultaneously rehabilitates them in updated form by assigning them innocuous territories, by anchoring their exceptionality in the everyday, or by relegating them to a »standby« mode from which they can be activated at any time in a crisis. The paradoxical figure of the postheroic hero is characterized above all by the ability to switch flexibly between »on« and »off« modes.

One of the fundamental traits of heroizations is the way that we are unable to remain indifferent to them. Hero figures affect us – one way or another. I find them highly suspect: too much emotionalism, too strongly oozing of masculinity, too much moralistic finger wagging, too much self-abnegation, too heavily reeking of death cult. This antiheroic affect, which has accompanied my investigation of heroisms from the beginning, is taken up in my concluding observations (chapter 8), where I attempt to use it productively for a radical critique of heroisms. When I suggest here, loosely drawing on the title of a book by Immanuel Wallerstein, that we need to »unthink«⁶ the heroic, I do not, however, do so out of some vain hope that the yearning for heroes and heroines and our susceptibility to them can be shaken off once and for all. That would itself be a megalomaniac heroic fantasy. As long as political or religious regimes depend on a spirit of self-sacrifice, as long as universalized marketization requires individuals to constantly outdo themselves and drives them to struggle to come out ahead, as long as experiences of powerlessness enable the rampant growth of delusions of greatness and the regimentation of everyday life fuels the yearning for transgressing limitations – as long as all of this continues, people will still search for, and find, heroes. And wherever they appear, we must see them as signs that indicate problems. They are an index of what price society exacts from the individual; and even though the staging of heroism, by ourselves and by others,

⁵ Heinz Dieter Kittsteiner, »Die heroische Moderne. Skizze einer Epochengliederung«, in: *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 10.11.2001.

⁶ Immanuel Wallerstein, *Unthinking Social Science: The Limits of Nineteenth Century Paradigms*. Cambridge: Polity, 1991.

suggests the opposite, heroes are the symptom of a crisis rather than the power capable of solving it.⁷

»Unthinking« the heroic means more than merely tracing its postheroic reinterpretations. Rather, it begins with the refusal to pit ostensibly »false« heroism against »true« heroism while giving the latter a general absolution. What needs to be debated are not the deeds themselves, but their heroic framing: there is no doubt that those who defy the powerful or willingly put themselves in danger in order to save the lives of others deserve respect and admiration. But declaring them heroes or heroines and calling upon others to imitate them transforms the moral affect into a normative endpoint. And anyone who uses heroic examples to try to move others to perform exceptional deeds and self-sacrifice makes them a means to an end. The converse, namely, elevating heroes and heroines so far above us that their deeds seem utterly unattainable, further entrenches an order in which some look up reverently and others are looked up to, in which the latter are called to lead while the former are in need of being led. In their supererogatory fulfilment of duty that goes beyond what is required, heroic figures may serve as a motivating example. But above all they produce a sense of guilt.

»Unthinking« the heroic thus means understanding heroizations as appeals that are meant to demand or motivate people to accomplish exceptional things, to accept hierarchies, to think about the social world as an ongoing struggle and to set aside their own happiness for the sake of higher goals. The effectiveness of these appeals is based not least on the power of fascination of heroic narratives. These stories move and excite us, they lead us to put heroes and heroines on a pedestal, to desire to imitate them, or to sun ourselves in their glory. »Unthinking« the heroic thus always also means telling other stories and telling stories in other ways.

⁷ This distanced attitude towards heroic appeals is a fundamental aspect of the reflections presented here, and distinguishes them from Dieter Thomä's emphatic plea in favour of the democratic hero, who is to be both »one of us« and »one for us« (*Warum Demokratien Helden brauchen: Plädoyer für einen zeitgemäßen Heroismus*, Berlin: Ullstein, 2019, pp. 175-183). Thomä, I would argue, fails to recognize that democratic and antidemocratic heroism can not be neatly separated from each other – after all, populist leaders also present themselves as »one of us« and »one for us«. Nor do heroes and heroines become compatible with democracy by their dedication to a "great cause" that keeps in check the public's authoritarian inclination to engage in a hero cult – for heroes are honoured precisely for what is seen as their selfless dedication. There is no doubt that democracies require courageous trailblazers and passionate defenders, but they need heroes and heroines only in the sense that a junky needs the next fix. Thomä's essay appeared after the manuscript for this book had been completed, too late for a more extensive discussion of his theses. There will, I hope, be future occasions to engage with them.