

More than adaptation to crises and threats. Research team developing concept of social resilience and new approaches to describe periods of upheaval in the late Middle Ages

The Research Unit “Resilience – Periods of Upheaval in Society in the Dialogue between Medieval Studies and Sociology” started their activities at Trier University on July 1. Scholars in German Studies, historians, legal experts and sociologists are now working together to develop a concept of social resilience. Organized in six projects, their aim is to develop new approaches to describe historical social upheavals in the late Middle Ages, while reviewing existing definitions of epochs, and scrutinizing alternative concepts like that of crisis or disaster. Professor Dr. Lukas Clemens is the spokesman of the Research Unit, while Professor Dr. Martin Endreß is the leader of the "Theory of Resilience" project. In the following, they explain the work and aims of the research group.

What are the aims of the collaborative research project?

Lukas Clemens

Against the background of life-threatening upheavals between the 13th and 16th century, the research group investigates what kinds of options for action social groups developed and applied in order to face events that threatened their very existence. For that purpose, they apply the concept of resilience for describing the potentials of coping, adaptation, and transformation in current societies to past, completed processes. In this context, our team intends to develop a typology of resilience for the Social Sciences and Humanities, which is to be used as a comparative instrument of analysis.

Resilience is primarily known as a term from the disciplines of Ecology and Psychology. How does your research group define resilience?

Martin Endreß

The concept of resilience originates from Psychology and has found its most intense application and evolution in Human and Social Ecology. In both disciplines the overall understanding of resilience is the ability of adaptation of individuals or (socio)ecological systems in the face of particular challenges. In that sense, the term is tailored to issues of strengthening existing and identifying new resources for the defense against menaces. Thus, it focuses first on a prospect of recovery, second an idea of preservation, and third a clear target. Our research group goes beyond that definition interpreting resilience as a set of dynamic processes of coping, adaptation, and transformation in the face of life-threatening challenges which are to be studied with a particular focus on the dynamics of secondary consequences.

So resilience is more than just adaptation to crises and threats?

Exactly. With this project our research team is breaking new scientific ground. First of all, this includes the effort to develop a concept of 'social resilience', i.e. a concept that, unlike a typical system-environment perspective, explicitly considers the multifaceted intertwined constellations of social conditions, and discusses issues of strategies of resilience, especially

such strategies that are reciprocal and potentially contradicting or excluding one another. This new approach therefore turns away from a research perspective one-sidedly focused on the aspects of 'recovery' and / or 'strengthening' by concentrating instead on studying secondary consequences of processes of resilience. It follows that a normative definition of resilience cannot have a clearly positive connotation. The objective is not to foster and strengthen characteristics to be preserved. When speaking of social conditions, especially of groups or major social 'collectives', what turns out to be resilience in one context, can be vulnerability in another. Hence, these interactions have to be studied systematically in order to be able to produce a concept of 'social resilience', as is the declared objective of our research group (following the concept of the Stockholm Resilience Center).

Moreover, our research approach opposes a teleological perspective, i.e. we consider objectives as constantly controversial and potentially contradictory. Also, it is of particular significance to analyze different layers of time, i.e. the different chronological developments of social processes and the temporal rhythms of the parties involved.

What is characteristic of the approach of the research group as a collaborative project of Medieval Studies and Sociology?

First of all, it's the interdisciplinary structure of the project. The research unit is composed of projects carried out by scholars from the disciplines of German Studies, Law, History and Sociology. This constellation of disciplines makes it imperative for the collaborative project to apply the 'modern' concept of resilience onto historical material in order to identify new perspectives on historical material with the help of a complex study based on our definition of resilience. We intend to carry out a review of common demarcations of historical periods whenever our examinations of processes of long duration suggest the necessity to redefine historical demarcation lines that have been taken for granted up to now. This particularly concerns the dynamics of secondary consequences and processes of failure.

With that in mind, we consider insufficient common terms like crisis, disaster, social change, etc. In this regard, we expect to find further perspectives through the development of a concept of social resilience.

What are the periods of upheaval you intend to study?

Lukas Clemens

The first historical period is that of the dynastic upheavals during the second half of the 13th century in Southern Italy, which, after the end of the Staufer dynasty, resulted in a split into an insular and a continental kingdom. The central question of one of the subprojects is how the new rulers attempted to successfully face these radical political, economic, and social changes. Another study analyzes the options for action and the strategies of resilience of Jewish families and communities in the face of various and profound experiences of disruption since the dramatic Black Death persecutions that took place in the middle of the 14th century. It studies the reactions of the affected Jews to drastically increasing developments of disfranchisement to permanent displacement during the following one and a half centuries and beyond. A further historical subproject focuses on the reactions of the Republic of Venice and one of its important constitutional bodies, the Council of Ten, on trade embargoes imposed by the King of Hungary, and, at the same time, King of the Romans and German King Sigismund during the first third of the 15th century, as well as on

the strategies of organizing resilience in the lagoon city. A subproject in literary studies investigates resilience within the culture of the free imperial cities against the background of experiences of radical changes throughout the 15th and 16th century, especially during the time of Reformation, by the example of the Nuremberg carnival plays. The project studies the phenomenon of the carnival plays as a way of coping with processes of upheaval for the master craftsmen who were excluded by the local rulers and had thus found in the plays a medium of self-expression. A research project from the field of Legal History investigates the adaptation of the Roman legislation as a source of resilience against the background of economic collapses during the late Middle Ages by the example of credit law, and studies the impacts on the monetary and economic systems.

What are potential accomplishments of this comparative study?

A comparative analysis of processes, resources, and strategies of resilience triggered by the social experiences of upheaval jointly studied by all research projects, enables the identification of sociopolitical, socioeconomic, and sociocultural basic patterns regarding the availability of means, implementation of measures, temporal effects, and deviations. At the same time, it draws attention to both innovative new approaches and unintended consequences, even failure, of processes of resilience, whose causes become clearer and can be better described.

As we said before, the research group is interdisciplinary and committed to fostering the dialogue between Medieval Studies and Sociology. Can you describe the essence of that dialogue and tell us how the different perspectives involved are able to complement each other?

Martin Endreß

The cooperation of historical disciplines or sub-disciplines and Sociology has a very long and successful tradition. It is since the 19th century that there have been productive approaches. The 20th century has then seen a revival of interdisciplinary constellations of cooperation, both in the French Annales school and in the Social history promoted by the Bielefeld School. This cooperation between the disciplines of Sociology and History, which used to be normal practice since the work of Max Weber, has basically come to an end throughout the last forty years. However, it is at the moment profiting from and promoting current momentum of revitalization on the part of Sociology, with new approaches regarding a Historical Sociology, as well as of the historical disciplines.

The objectives are a systematical, historically informed connection of empirical research and typological generalizations, empirically-based theory building, the exchange and combination of the concepts developed and established in their respective disciplinary contexts with the aim of finding a joint definition, and, lastly, a terminology considering and including historical dynamics for the analysis of social conditions of the present and the language of observation developed within.

What new insights do you expect for the involved disciplines from the concept of resilience? What is the added value the concept offers compared to other models for describing profound social changes like crises?

Lukas Clemens

Developing a typology of resilience based on the cooperation of historical-empirical subprojects and sociological theory building enables us to create explanation patterns as well as a more distinguished description and basis for comparison that are unlike any of the prevalent concepts of crisis and disaster research we have known so far.