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Preventionism and Obstacles for Protest in Neoliberalism. Linking Governmentality Studies and Protest Research

Book Part, Published Version

This version is available at <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:kobv:83-opus4-65349>.



Suggested Citation

Ullrich, Peter: Preventionism and Obstacles for Protest in Neoliberalism. Linking Governmentality Studies and Protest Research. - In: Heßdörfer, Florian ; Pabst, Andrea ; Ullrich, Peter: Prevent and tame : Protest under (self-)control. - Berlin: Dietz, 2010. - (Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung: Manuskripte ; 88) - ISBN 978-3-320-02246-4. - S. 14-23.

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Preventionism and Obstacles for Protest in Neoliberalism. Linking Governmentality Studies and Protest Research

Introduction¹

In a recent article in the »Handbook of Social Movements Across Disciplines«, Smith and Fetner (2007, 15) differentiate on a general level between structural and cultural approaches to social movement research. While the former showed interest in material resources, organizations and institutions (what Smith/Fetner consider in a somewhat narrow sense as structure), the latter shared an interest in processes of reception and interpretation of these (what they consider as culture). So in their view social movement research's interest is restricted to the movements' strategic, organizational and interpretational questions. This is typical for a research sector whose standard repertoire of theories (resource mobilization, political opportunities, framing) prefers micro- and meso-perspectives while virtually ignoring (new developments in) social theory and conceptions of social change.

It might be fruitful to confront protest research² with such relatively new ideas and insights. This especially applies to theories that explicitly deal with core questions social movements are also concerned with, like questions of power and the struggle for persistence and/or change in society, which is by definition *the* criterion *per se* for social movements (Raschke 1991). The mainstream of social movement research understandably focused on the movement side of the movement-power-coin. Being interested in movements' identities, action repertoires, resources and communicative (framing) strategies and especially in their success or resonance, scholars of protest did not shed much light on the power side. Within protest research only the theory of »political opportunity structures« (POS) systematically deals with the political system, which is the main societal subsystem associated with power. But these theories that »analyze the environment of social movements as a set of conditions which facilitate or restrict mobilization and movement success« (Rucht/Neidhardt 2002, 9) are deadlocked in a basically »situational« concept of contextual conditions. This situational restriction is partly transgressed by the so-called »European current« of POS-theory, which focuses on long-term conditions of the political system (Kitschelt 1986). Another aspect in overcoming this situational restriction was added by the POS offshoot-concepts »cultural opportunity structures« and »discursive opportunity structures«. While

1 I am indebted to Anja Lê, Florian Heßdörfer and Andrea Pabst for their helpful comments on the paper.

2 The terms »protest research« and »social movement research« will be used synonymously here.

they can also be conceptualized as situational factors, they have had their strongest impact in explaining deeply rooted long term causes of movement ideas and frames. This, for example, applies to the fact that (independent of the protest issue they are concerned with) social movements in Germany are culturally bound to frames which have to take the German Nazi past into consideration, as it has been shown by Ferree et al. (2002) and Ullrich (2008). Similarly, Koopmans/Kriesi (1997) explained the success of extreme right wing parties in several European countries by the varying degree of inclusiveness of the respective concept of nationality, which can be seen as a cultural opportunity structure for the resonance of right wing radicals.

Besides these deep-rooted and long lasting cultural issues and their institutional manifestations, social movement research has to take into account the effects of societal change. And it has to focus on the issue, which Görg (1999, 17) calls *the* central problem of critical theory: the question of the mediation of social structure and subjectivity. Protest research's concentration on the contestator side of the interdependent protest-power relation could be overcome, for example, by introducing aspects of governmentality studies into protest research.

Which subjectivities and systems of movement knowledge are being formed in relation to changing forms of the regulation of power—be they conventional and affirmative or resistant or hybrid—has been a guiding question of Michel Foucault's work and is still in governmentality studies (Bröckling et al. 2000). This field of research has been deeply inspired by Foucault's books »Discipline and Punish« (Foucault 1995) and especially by the »Lectures at the Collège de France« (Foucault 2008, 2009). They strongly focus on the formation of subjectivities under »neoliberal discursive dominance« or »economization« or »commodification« of the social and the politics of responsabilization and activation of the citizen-subjects (Lessenich 2008).

This paper shall explore one specific facet of neoliberal governmentality and its possible impact on protest research: the question of the preventionist politics of self-activation. This approach is conducted by mutual enrichment of two virtually unconnected fields of research under the common focus of the formation of subjectivities, i.e. political sociology (especially social movement and protest research) and the field of medical prevention and public health. The first chapter will explore medical prevention and its problems and aporias and ask for their impact on the formation of neoliberal activation-subjectivities. The second chapter outlines theoretical considerations, while the third and final part is to sketch perspectives for social movement research resulting from the ideas considered before.

Prevention and Preventionism³

Prevention is one of the key words of contemporary zeitgeist. Ubiquitous are the attempts to prevent crime, diseases, crises, wars, obesity, cancer, drug addiction and even running amok. And of course one is likely to appreciate prevention because everybody knows: it is better to prevent than to cure. But the matter is a bit more complicated. Prevention also has something of a religious promise. It promises a good future that must be taken care of in the present. The wish for more and more prevention can also be seen as the desire to master an uncertain future.

And as the discourse of prevention suggests that there really is the opportunity to control future events this can quickly turn into an obsession. Whoever wants to control the future must know everything about the present, which is likely to have an impact on the future. So prevention necessarily means data collection, surveillance, and control.

There have been preventionist developments of that kind especially in the security sector and in criminology. They have come in the shape of the broken-windows-theory, preventive CCTV, data retention (the preventive law allowing the governments to store personal telecommunication data), and all the other new security laws and restrictions of personal freedoms and basic rights western societies had to face after 9/11—all contributing to what Garland (2001) called the »culture of control«. I use the term preventionism, which I borrowed from Ulrich Bröckling's (2008) »preventionists«, to mark the paradigm shift to unlimited prevention, the infinite desire to subordinate everything under the idea of prevention. The core area of prevention becoming an uncontrollable growing preventionism is—besides security—the health sector.

Especially the dismantling of the welfare state in the health sector, which could be seen in many western countries, has very often come in the shape of disease prevention. Two examples of many from Germany shall illustrate that. Firstly, laws oblige people to make additional financial contributions for dental prostheses if they have not regularly taken part in screenings and medical checkups. Having once missed the annual check-up can easily result in some hundred Euros extra for a necessary prosthesis. Secondly, chronically ill patients in Germany normally have to contribute only up to 1 % of their annual income for health care—unless they have missed regular screenings. In that unfortunate case the percentage to be paid increases to 2 %.

That development is problematic for many reasons. Prevention is used as an indirect means to dismantle the welfare state in ways that seem highly legitimate, because it is so easy to argue that those who do not care should be taken care of; that those who do not obey the preventive demands should be held responsible.

3 For a more detailed version of the ideas presented in this section, see Ullrich (2009; cf. Bröckling 2008, Bartens 2008).

Mediated through class and education related inequalities, inequality in the health sector is thereby also increased. The better educated are less likely to fail in that system, which forces people to take part in medical examinations or, in some cases, to at least get counsel on preventive measures and seriously consider what kind of behavior is expected from them or is economically and medically most efficient. The people's freedom to decide concerning their own bodies is significantly restricted.

And there is much criticism of the often compulsory prevention programs even from a medical point of view. Without going too much into medical details, two examples shall illustrate the general problem of this uncertainty and the basic ambiguity of many preventive measures.

The intestinal coloscopy is suggested for the prevention of intestinal cancer. On the one hand the number of deaths from cancer is minimized. Unfortunately, it has been shown that, on the other hand, the risk of this screening injuring the bowel is high. The examination may result in mental or physical distress. There may be hygienic problems. And sometimes there are unintended side effects of the necessary pre-examination zero-diet and anesthesia, which may result in serious injuries, accidents and even deaths. The death toll of these side effects equals the number of those benefitting from the screening (Mühlhäuser 2007).

There is a bit more common knowledge about the problems of mammography, the cancer screening of the female breast. This is—like the coloscopy—an often painful procedure. It might even be the source of cancer due to the radiation exposure. The biggest problem is the low specificity and the low sensitivity of the screening methods used. This results in serious problems. A recent systematic Cochrane Review of several randomized clinical trials showed that screening leads to a reduction in breast cancer mortality of 15 % and at the same time to 30 % over-diagnosis and overtreatment. In other words (or numbers): »This means that for every 2000 women invited for screening throughout 10 years, one will have her life prolonged. In addition, 10 healthy women, who would not have been diagnosed if there had not been screening, will be diagnosed as breast cancer patients and will be treated unnecessarily. Furthermore, more than 200 women will experience important psychological distress for many months because of false positive findings.« (Gøtzsche/Nielsen 2009)

So the screening is useful only for a few women; for many it is mental and physical distress. The authors of the Cochrane review see this as a clear ambiguity, which can only lead to the need to give extensive information to women who consider taking part in the screening or are invited to. But no scientific result can ease the burden of the decision they have to take.

This leads us to another point. Most of the preventive programs—be they compulsory or not—have ambiguities that cannot be easily overcome. But prevention is quite often propagated as a magnificent promise and a kind of salvation. In public discourse and in popular belief many of these ambiguities are not well

known or even ignored. One of the worst examples is a campaign by German health insurance providers to convince women to take part in their screening program. Their widely distributed leaflet even mentions some ›disadvantages‹ of the screening. The risks pointed out are in fact the minor ones like radiation exposure and the possibility of not detecting an existing tumor. The main problem and the biggest argument against taking part in screening, the (extremely high) risk of receiving an over-diagnosis and overtreatment, is not even mentioned.

Based on this pro-prevention biased discourse, preventionism has the tendency to occupy all areas of life, or in Habermasian terms to colonize the lifeworld (Lebenswelt) with instrumental rationality of the bureaucratic and market system. We all might know the reflection about »Should I eat that steak or should I rather eat the healthy salad?«, »Should I take butter or cholesterol-free spread?« A German TV station provided us with an example of the ominous aspects of the preventive approach. They reported that »Kissing prevents wrinkles and dental plaque«, »kissing prolongs life«, »stimulates the immune system« and »makes you slim«.⁴

These examples should illustrate the potential infinity of preventionism. It can be applied everywhere. Everything we do can be evaluated in terms of whether it is healthy or not. As a matter of fact, there is never a definite right answer to the question, what the best preventive behavior or measure is. What counts more? Is it the relaxing anti-stress effect of snowboarding (which is seen as something positive) or the risk of an injury (which is negative)? What about the glass of wine? The cigarette? In that sense preventionism in the end becomes an enemy of lust and joy. And all that almost inevitably leads to the necessity of surveillance systems and data bases to record all the check-ups. So prevention means control (Decker 2005).

Many of the questions prevention poses cannot be easily answered, many of the preventive demands cannot be easily met. Whatever one decides, either way one will often be right and wrong at the same time. There are almost always advantages and disadvantages of the specific preventive measures. The one right answer is not available. Seen from that perspective, preventionism is a kind of general and quite unspecific demand of society towards the people. And it is an endless demand that cannot ultimately be met. Preventionism makes you think about society and what society wants from you. It makes you think about how to behave well by thinking about what might be good for you. In the idea of care for oneself the social and the individual are mediated, because it is an almost general individual interest to care for oneself, but this can be thought of only in the concepts and along the criteria of a given social order.

The dispositive of prevention is an omnipresent phenomenon that makes people think preventionism-like without being forced to do so. Preventionism therefore can be seen as a means of individualising and subjectifying societal demands.

4 <http://www.heute.de/ZDFheute/inhalt/19/0,3672,7262675,00.html> [2008-07-06].

Seen from that perspective, preventionism is a productive way of government, activating people to govern themselves through the formation of ›preventive selves‹ (see Mathar 2010).

Foucaultian Perspectives

Before explaining what all this has got to do with social movements, I would like to point out some theoretical ideas, mainly based in Michel Foucault's works, that might help us understand the developments described.

The first association one may have considering the above mentioned techniques of surveilling and regulating health is Foucault's (2008, 2009) concept of biopower. This concept captures modern states' practices of productively organizing and regulating bodies and populations, which go far beyond the old power of sovereignty that merely decided who will live and who will not. Foucault and other theorists had in mind public health practices of optimizing people's health by preventive measures. This has to be mentioned to point out that it is neither natural nor an eternal idea that states decide on how people regulate their physical and mental well-being. It is an aspect of modern societies and even more so under the aegis of neoliberal self-activation politics.

The second concept one may think of, and this one is of greater interest here, is the metaphor of the panopticon and the type of subjectifying processes described by it. The Panopticon (designed firstly by Jeremy Bentham in the late 18th century) was an architectural solution for institutions to control many people. Foucault took up Bentham's idea, turning it from a normative into an analytical tool, to better describe the functioning of disciplining institutions of modern societies, many of which are based on an asymmetric distribution of seeing and being seen, like Bentham's panopticon. It is *the* special feature of the panopticon, that those under scrutiny (prisoners, pupils, workers, shoppers) can never be quite certain whether they are being watched or not at a given moment.

The important aspect of the panopticon is the subjectifying process, which Foucault saw as typical for all modern societies' institutions and which is linked to this feature of uncertainty. Any behavior therefore poses questions about its possible results, depending on the answer to the question: Am I under surveillance momentarily? And, if so, am I behaving well? What should I do to achieve that goal or at least to avoid punishment for failure or misbehavior? These kinds of institutional arrangements that elicit thoughts like the ones described always imply a productive power of a self-activating kind. These institutional arrangements initiate a process of incorporating the demands of the surveillant by initiating a specific subjectivation resulting in specific subject positions.

Processes of this kind and especially their changes under neoliberal conditions have strongly inspired surveillance studies. But the panopticon is a relatively

fixed arrangement. It may be helpful to understand the functioning of CCTV systems. Preventionism, as described above and its control mechanisms (like e-health cards, medical registers and files), reflect a more subtle, more incoherent, more complex, more infinite, more productive type of government and related states of mind or perceptions. These kinds of logic of governing through self governance are exactly what governmentality studies are concerned with (cf. Bröckling et al. 2000). Because preventionism, like other activating strategies, often leaves you in relative uncertainty about the demands⁵ of power, it makes you think and act on your own. The ambiguities of the cancer screening, for example, and the fact that the individual has to face these facts and is forced to make decisions in a situation of uncertainty shows the subtle and activating character of preventionism. ›Activating‹ does not necessarily mean that it makes you act materially, but that an atmosphere of uncertainty, unrest, or tension is produced that makes one think about strategies, at least. That is why it is a productive technique of government. It is like a panopticon without a centre, an omnipresent panopticon ›embodied‹ in the individuals' minds as well as in discourse and social practices.

The term governmentality is often described as having the two constituents ›government‹ and ›mentality‹, which cover two basic aspects of the concept. Governmentality studies, as inspired by Foucault, strongly emphasize the individual, subjective aspect of governing. They focus on governing becoming self-control or, let us say: mentality.

Governmentality studies have been successfully applied to the health care sector. They are prominent in critical criminology and many other fields of research. Interestingly, they have not yet had any influence on the study of social movements and protest, although they deal with core areas concerned: they are interested in processes of power and especially in changes of power relations under current (neoliberal) conditions.

Preventionism and Protest

Governmentality studies pose new questions, questions protest research has not yet asked nor answered. One could expect that the neoliberally activated subject tends not to articulate discontent and unhappiness as a demand towards society. One might expect that social attribution of problem causes is substituted by individual attribution. The preventionist and neoliberally activated subject might prefer to ask »What have I done wrong?« instead of »What's wrong with society?« In that sense, preventionism can be seen as a tool to attack the legitimacy of *social critique* protest, as a tool to delegitimize demands people have.

5 In that respect, it is worth mentioning the observation of Heßdörfer/Bachmann (2009, cf. Heßdörfer in this volume) that such demands may be restricted to only signal to the individual that ›society exists‹, that they are not alone, that they cannot do whatever they want—without clearly telling what they *shall* do.

That development can be compared with the process of delegitimizing social critique by means of artistic critique as described by Boltanski and Chiapello (2001).

Considering these ideas, some propositions can be formulated and connected: Changes in governing and related mentality from more direct ways of control to preventionist and self-activating governing strategies are massive. Within this development, new subjectivities are being formed. These subjectivities do not consider protest to be legitimate, as their predecessors did.

This is a very strong and quite abstract hypothesis. We can also imagine counter-tendencies. For example, neoliberalism also produces new reasons and may thereby increase the likelihood of protest. Also, neo-liberal society's demands could be seen as unreasonable, as impertinence by the people.

Before we can answer these questions, some more conceptual and empirical research has to be carried out. Social movement theory and protest research has not yet incorporated governmentality studies at all. Foucault, for example, is hardly mentioned in the relevant German or international journals. In the references sections of the international journal *Mobilization* and the most important German journal on movements and protest *Forschungsjournal Neue Soziale Bewegungen*, Foucault is virtually nonexistent!

One reason might be that the main focus of social movement scholars in the previous, say, 20 years has always been the above-mentioned strategic one on factors for movement success. So one analyses resources and framing. Only the political opportunity structures approach strongly emphasized the role of the other side, the side of power, and its effects. But POS theory focuses on continuities and changes in movement's current environmental conditions. It is not particularly interested in intergenerational changes and its underlying subjectifying processes.

Thus there is wide potential for research. It can be conducted within this general question on a quite abstract level. The question to be answered would be: Does preventionism reduce the likelihood of protest by attacking the legitimacy of social attribution of problems?

But research can also focus on more specific aspects of that general model. So one could examine if aspects of the preventionist mode of subjectivity appear in different currents of the movement sector or in relation to specific questions. How, one may ask with Marco Tullney (in this volume), does surveillance of the workplace influence organizing and industrial relations? How does it influence the subjectivities of workers who are not trusted (generally and preventively)? The outlined theoretical perspective may also change the views on protest policing and repression. It is not only interesting to know if repression works and hinders protest, but also in what specific way this occurs. The governmentality focus allows for the realization of the more subtle aspects of self-control as self-management or: the everyday weighing of risks and how it becomes habitual in a (potential) activist's life. What is clearly needed is more research into the effects

of the surveillance of activists like in the anti-terror-investigations in Germany (Holm/Roth, in this volume). Also, the mass phenomenon of videotaping protest and protesters needs more investigation concerning its direct and long-term effects on protest participation, action repertoires and conflict dynamics (Ulrich/Wollinger 2010). The ubiquitous apparatuses and networks of the surveillant assemblage (Haggerty/Ericson 2000) that protesters and social movements get in touch with (sometimes indirectly, sometimes the hard way) should be taken into account and related to their behavior and thinking.

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