

CONFERENCE REPORT

"Crisis, Risks and New Regionalisms in Europe II: Emergency Diasporas and Borderlands"

DAAD Hochschuldialog mit Südeuropa

Technische Universität Chemnitz, 1-5 June 2016

Terms abundantly present in recent public discourses have been refugee crisis, migration, European crisis, humanitarian crisis, border crisis, threats to human integrity or social peace, crisis, risks. Apart from the semantic differences, all refer to the seemingly same public discourse. There have been discrepancies in the perception and reaction of the recent phenomenon of migration of refugees and peoples to "Europe", nevertheless the question whether Europe's reaction has been adequate remains open. The academic discourse, however, on notions such as crisis, risks, emergency diasporas or borderlands was taken up again in Chemnitz.

The second DAAD-"Hochschuldialog mit Südeuropa"-conference on "Crisis, Risks and New Regionalisms in Europe II: Emergency Diasporas and Borderlands" took place on 1-5 June 2016 in Chemnitz, organized by the Chair of English Literatures at the Technische Universität Chemnitz in cooperation with the Department of Studies in Language Meditation and Intercultural Communication of the University of Milan. It was for the second time that issues of risks, crisis, diasporas and borderlands in Europe were discussed within an academic context, following up on the first DAAD-conference of similar content held in Milan in December 2014. The conference brought together a group of scholars and intellectuals of various professional and cultural backgrounds who discussed and raised a number of intriguing and thought-provoking questions related to the topics of this academic event. The notions of crisis, risks and regionalisms are undoubtedly open to many interpretations. Nevertheless, speakers and presenters of the conference conveyed how there was a historical temporality between the colonial past and the "postcolonial present".

An official opening of the conference by the host, Prof. Dr. Cecile Sandten addressed the themes and issues that were to be raised and discussed at this academic event. In his keynote lecture on "Afro-Pessimism and the Ruse of Analogy", Frank B. Wilderson III (University of California Irvine, US and Research Ambassador of the University of Bremen, Germany) addressed the issue of Afro-Pessimism by arguing that the regime of violence that positions between the Black and the Gramscian subaltern is not analogous despite having been often otherwise by practitioners of Cultural Studies. In his compelling lecture, Wilderson interrogated the logic of the Bakhtinian chronotope and reflected on Gramsci's theory of civil society.

During the first workshop on "General Theory", Sebastian Berg (Ruhr University Bochum) referred to the case study of the British Left in his paper on "The Problems of a European Left" by analyzing the relationship of the Left with the European Union. In a rather recent historical analysis (from the 1960s on), by means of political sociology and critical discourse analysis, Berg related to controversies in the Labour Party, the trade union movement and the intellectual left as objects of his analysis. Along these lines, the discussion with the audience focused on how and why there has been a gravitation towards right-wing tendencies in politics. Questioning whether the EU is still able to maintain its original political "configuration", a pro-position towards the UK staying in the EU was a common stand amongst the participants.

"Pedagogy of Borders: Between the Classroom and the Streets" was the title of Marta Baraldi's (University of Milan) paper. Pedagogical strategies of Cultural Studies focusing on two crucial elements, namely the "classroom" and the "streets" were analyzed. In light of the recent events, namely migration, Baraldi suggested that the conversational strategy that Cultural Studies encourage between education and the multicultural society is worth practicing. Along similar lines, Lidia Anna De Michelis (University of Milan) interestingly broached the issue of representing the "borderization" of Europe and the criminalization of migrants by institutions and the media. In her paper on "Reclaiming Neoliberal Zones of Indifference: Exclusionary Borderscapes in Anders Lustgarten's *Lampedusa*", she focused on the example of the island of Lampedusa and the way migrants have been "discursively re-constructed". Introducing the play *Lampedusa* by British political activist Anders Lustgarten, de Michelis referred to Europe's collective responsibility for the tragedy of contemporary migration. De Michelis concluded her paper by stating that another better world is possible and necessary.

After the lunch break, the conference continued with the second workshop titled "Crisis in Europe: Emergency Diasporas and Borderlands". While Vivien Sommer (TU Chemnitz) presented her project on finding appropriate media solutions for the refugees currently located in Chemnitz, Yodit Estifanos Afewerki (University of Milan) shared her experiences of working in Sicily as a Tigrinya cultural mediator. Speaking about her field work, Afewerki claimed that the current crisis is less of a migration crisis and rather a question of inequalities by highlighting that migrants are expected to "fit into specific classifications notwithstanding the different and infinite life stories and experiences that characterize each single migrant". Giada Ragone (Max Planck Institute) brought a different perspective to the discussion. From a legal approach, she talked about the main asylum policies adopted by European countries mostly affected by the recent migration flows. By interpreting the two recent cases reviewed by the European Court of Human Rights, namely that of HIRSI in Italy and the M.S.S. in Belgium, Ragone indicated that cases of rejection and denial of asylum rights could be considered violations of the European Convention of Human Rights. The pleasure of listening to the most enjoyable and gripping readings by Jamaican Paris-based writer Alecia McKenzie and Indian gay writer R. Raj Rao, accompanied by wine and a Mediterranean buffet, gave the conference participants the opportunity to reflect on the fruitful discussions of a successful day one of the conference in the historic setting of the Kaßberg Gewölbe.

I found the conference as really first-class. The scientific level of academic and students' presentations were all challenging, some even inspiring and compelling.

The organization was as well excellent and very welcoming and helpful. We were made to feel as really among friends and at home. It was very nice as well to be able to spend all the time together and go on building interesting contacts and engaging conversations at all moments.

The social events and venues were also very nice, friendly and relaxing.

Thank you for your warm and generous hospitality and a compelling and thought-provoking intellectual experience.

Lidia De Michelis, Milan

While during the first day there was more focus on "general theories" related to the crisis in Europe, day two presented a wide range of case studies connected to the conference topic, offering more intercultural communication theory and specific cultural approaches. In her keynote lecture on "Limits of Hospitality", Heidrun Friese (TU Chemnitz) defined hospitality in terms of historical semantics, as "a religious and ethic duty". With her broad knowledge and experience in the areas of intercultural communication and intercultural competence, Friese initially spoke about mobility in

The outcome of this conference is the most important aspect we have to consider. In particular the conference was aimed to invite students (in particular) to understand the importance of opening a conversation with others and in other fields of research.

I hope we can continue this discourse in order to implement the consciousness of participants on the fact that one cannot produce knowledge (real knowledge) if this knowledge will not serve to better the world.

Roberto Pedretti, Milan

general, and then focused on the recent debates of migration and refuge. Paradoxes of democracy and their relationship to the limits of hospitality were addressed by means of Lampedusa, to also reflect on the "social imagination and images of mobile people" and how these articulate the contemporary border regime. During the first workshop on "New Regionalisms: Metropolitan Marketplaces and Urban Underbellies", Miguel Mellino (University of Naples L'Orientale), Lucrezia Cerabino (University of Milan) and Carola Grandi (University of Milan) provided very thought-provoking presentations from rather heterogeneous contexts and sources of work. Miguel Mellino approached the recent "European Crisis" via the history of European colonial rule and Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics in his paper on "The State of the European Crisis: Neoliberalism Within Biopolitics and Necropolitics". He argued that the current crisis should not be referred to as a crisis but rather "the reverse side of the Neoliberal European project". "This is not simply a crisis in Europe but Europe in a time of crisis", he concluded.

As two papers notably demonstrated, colonial hegemony and post-colonial crisis are interconnected with the multi-cultural identity and cultural heritage. Lucrezia Cerabino shared very interesting results of her work in the city of Kaduna. Her presentation "Kaduna, the City of Crocodiles: Colonial Heritage, Multi-Cultural Identity and Urban Challenges" offered an overview of the Nigerian city from the perspective of a scholar aiming at analyzing the impact that colonisation played in shaping the urban structures of such colonised cities as well as at "dismantling the colonial stereotypes that fabricate African cities as chaotic megalopolis from which huge waves of migrants flee to invade Europe". This presentation was particularly interesting for the audience, that then addressed many questions to the speaker. Carola Grandi on the other hand spoke about "Borders of Identity: Hip Hop as Indigenous Culture" amongst the Canadian aboriginal youth and how hip hop was used as a means of "deconstructing hegemonic stereotypes associated with indigeneity". Grandi focused on how expressions, protests and resistance texts used in hip hop were interpreted from outside of Canada.

A very interesting link between Chinua Achebe and his autobiography *There Was a Country* and today's European Union and the idea of the Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis of a new

pan-European Movement was made by Sara Cesario (University of Milan) in the second workshop on "General Theory". Relating history to the present (presentation title: History/Story: A New Perspective for Europe), Cesario referred to Achebe's suggestion that "history is never interpreted from only one point of view but that the visions of (hi)story should take into consideration all the human personal stories, generating an emotional and empathic bond, which would lead to a common focus on collective good". She associated the above with the European Union of today, which hints at having lost its core values, namely unity, integration, cooperation. She concluded her presentation by quoting Varoufakis in that the European Union puts together peoples who speak different languages, embrace different cultures and have different national histories. Cesario called for a restoration of Europe according to Achebe's suggestion. The notion of cartographic maps as in Nurrudin Farah's novel *Maps* was the subject of analysis presented by Mala Pandurang (Dr. BMN College, SNDT Women's University, India). As in the above-mentioned novel, Pandurang also challenged the idea of maps and "their unquestioned abiter of reality". Her intriguing paper on "'Unmapping Maps': Borders Territories and the Crisis of Identity" correlated also with the current politics of borders, being and becoming. Day two of the conference drew to a close with a film presentation and discussion. *Dauters. La vita va Avanti (Life goes on)* was a documentary that underwent the scrutiny of psychologists Eleonora Voli (Frantz Fanon Association Turin) and Stefania Gavin (University of Turin) aiming at "collecting stories and memories of Nigerian immigrant women, in order to create new possible archives of the present".

Despite the participants' tendency to a languorous Saturday morning session, the keynote speech on "Re-Thinking Borderlands: Contesting the 'Normal'" by María do Mar Castro Varela (Alice Salomon University Berlin) aroused the attention of all attendees. By referring mainly to the work of Gloria Anzaldúa, Castro Varela drew the debate towards the issue of refugee crisis in what she interpreted to be a border crisis. Contesting borders and their definitions, her talk engaged the audience in a veritable intriguing and thought-provoking manner. By means of Anzaldúa's concepts of belonging, the state and the borders, Castro Varela questioned the radical "reconfiguration of the way we conceive an "us" in the world".

A debate session titled "The Crisis in Europe" involved four talks of slightly different theories and perspectives. Utopian identity and institutional communication were issues broached in Miriam Bait and Marina Brambilla's (University of Milan) paper, which reflected their ongoing research on outlining a contemporary utopia related to public communication. Bait and Brambilla quoted Fairclough in that language use is a form of social practice that shapes the society, and therefore their research analysed the communication strategies of public agencies on their websites. Suggesting the use of technological tools as facilitators for inclusion, opportunity and social change, the authors called for an e-Utopia project, namely one that would assist in building "a better society that is able to recognize the needs of present and future generations: sustainable development, economic prosperities, cultural vitality, social cohesion".

Like the previous speakers, Claudia Gualtieri presented questions for debates with the aim of promoting an exchange of ideas and discussions. Her presentation titled *Is Tradition Omnilocal? Observations of Migrant Theatre*, Gualtieri addressed the notions of tradition in relation to the global context of recent migration. She defined tradition as "a set of cultural forms and expressions that are perceived and recognized by a group of people as belonging to their shared history and memory", therefore its locality are evident. Referring to new Italian literature by African writers and drawing a relation to migration, Gualtieri claimed that traditions of hosting communities may be re-discovered and resurrected while pertaining to their local roots. Roberto Pedretti (University of Milan) discussed the aspects of crisis from an economic and social perspective. Invoking crises as instruments of

capitalism used to treat economic and social problems, he raised the question whether there are gaps signaling a possibility to go beyond capitalism. Pedretti claimed that while words like socialism and socialist are acquiring new currency in the political space, concepts like nation-state, democracy, citizenship, representation have seemed to collapse. Moreover, Itala Vivan (University of Milan) hypothesized that the core of the frictions and contradiction between the European hosting countries (with a focus on the Mediterranean Area) and the incoming migrants may not only be due to Islamophobia or the fear of the other, but also, or rather, to gender questions. By calling for a debate on the issue, she suggested several reference readings and episodes of occurrences (like New Year's Eve in Cologne and others). Finally, Vivan argued that the whole topic of migration "falls into the pattern of postcolonial situations".

The conference culminated with a final roundtable discussion on "Crisis, Risks and New Regionalisms in Europe", which allowed more time for further exchange amongst the presenters and the audience. The abundantly fruitful discussions were wrapped up by a specially produced video lecture on "What Words are Worth" by Lawrence Grossberg, professor of Cultural Studies and Popular Culture at the University of North Carolina and participant of the first part of the conference in Milan in December 2014. Lastly, it is necessary to allocate merited grants to Thaer Ayoub, a Syrian writer and journalist, who in a most moving fashion read his poems in German and Arabic. This was

Because a term such as the "refugee crisis" has been adopted in dominant media representations and channels, it has in turn defined what a large part of the people (in Europe) consider to be "true". They perceive the crisis not as something that concerns the people in war zones who are in need of refuge in other parts of the world, including Europe, but as a catastrophe that will eventually affect themselves, their own lives.

Thus, our intention when we put together our second conference was to facilitate exchange and dialogue with scholars from the different fields of British and American Literary and Cultural Studies, Postcolonial Studies, Media and Communication Studies, Sociology, Pedagogy, Anthropology, Political Science and History - in order to foster interdisciplinary and transnational dialogue on the present conjuncture of crisis in Europe and beyond.

Cecile Sandten, Chemnitz

followed by the theater performance *Aphrodites Rebellen* (Aphrodite's Rebels) which the conference participants were presented in a video screening by the student theatre group of the TU Chemnitz, *Turmbau 62*, together with refugees. In the play they enact the story of Thaer Ayoub and his flight from Syria to Germany in search of a safe shelter.

Valeza Polster (Technische Universität Chemnitz)