

"Symbolische Herrschaft: Die Hinterbühne sozialer Konflikte."

Symbolic power. The backstage of social conflicts.

When conflict research refers to the issue of "culture" it is with reference to two concerns: Culture in the form of contested (self-)identities or culture in the form of an implicitly shared set of meanings (cf. Wimmer). Using Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power, I propose that "culture" can structure conflicts in a third way: As implicit sets of meanings often reflect the interests of dominating power groups what appears as a "value-free" cultural preference tends to reflect norms and institutions which exert hegemony over dominated groups. The concept of symbolic power enables us to gain a better understanding of the volatility of many social conflicts.

This is exemplified for so called "intercultural conflicts" in the context of migration. The term "intercultural conflict" implies that cultural difference is the main issue and complicating factor in intercultural relations. Like many social conflicts intercultural conflicts, too, are characterized by a "backstage" of power asymmetry, which will lead to systematically differing perspectives on social reality. Divergent perspectives on a conflict are exemplified by a case study of an "intercultural" conflict narrated by a white German anti-racist. It is in the best interest of the narrating dominant party to interpret her opponent's behavior as an individual violation of self-evident norms thereby ignoring the question of power asymmetry. The dominated party on the other hand will need to show, that the dominant norm is neither self-evident nor universal. As cultural dominance is a group level effect the dominated party has to describe themselves in collective terms, thereby reproducing "irrational" group affiliations.

Systematically differing perspectives on the conflict reflect the strategically differing power positions of the conflicting parties. Against the background of symbolic power asymmetries some goals of mediation such as reaching agreement about the framing of the conflict must be reconsidered.