

Project Paper “Onigiri for Berlin”

How to prevent economic superiority from causing mental dominance

Summary

The present social practice investigates how to disentangle perceived economic preeminence and sense of relative mental superiority in social relations. We propose to tackle the problem of poverty and homelessness in a counter-hegemonic manner that overcomes economic inequality, but does not create the mental states of superiority and inferiority within the society.

To prevent stigmatisation and actualization of the poor-rich binary opposition, we move away from the existing social relations within German society and build new ones. New social relations aim to improve the financial situation of the poor without creating subordination-domination psychological opposition. These social relations are formed exclusively in an economic, non-normative and post-colonial context, to avoid the influence of the existing historical identities of the social groups. The present case sheds the light onto two social entities: the poor in Berlin (beggars and metro musicians) and the users of Japanese crowdfunding/donation mobile app Polca.

Theoretical foundation

A century before economic inequality concerns entered the mainstream discourse, an Italian political economist A. Loria (1912: 181) pointed out that “[e]conomic superiority is by no means an index of superior psycho-physical aptitudes”. However, different economic positioning in society among other factors does still affect identity formation. Today’s case in point are the homeless and panhandlers which attach to these stigmatized identities over time and in turn suffer from low self-esteem and low self-worth mental state (Parker 2012).

To avoid the formation of subordination-domination relationship, we exaggerate the conditions start off with three important premises:

1. Setting up the conditions of no direct communication between the social groups.
2. Don’t help - reward.
3. Escaping from postcolonial issues.

As their identities form against the Other of “the wealthy or better-off” social group, this social practice argues that economic superiority does create an inferiority complex in the poor. It also cements the hierarchical relationship between the social groups. Such mental constructs are “stickier” than personal financial circumstances. Therefore, we consider the problems of homelessness and upward social mobility fully resolvable *only* in an identities-free space. On a practical level, it means taking two social groups that have been in no contact beforehand and could not have formed identities against each other.

Moreover, we criticise the current paradigm of “helping” the impoverished. Whether financial or psychotherapeutic, help creates similar relationship of subordination and domination

between the economically and psychologically superior “helper” and the inferior “helped”. Be it a donation, tax transfer or social allowance, top-down financial transactions result in cementing the structure of power relationship. Thus, to avoid psychological affects, inequality should be managed in a non-normative and purely economic context. In practice, we simply ask one social group to deliver a substantial service to another against a substantial reward, instead of enclosing both into moral relativism. We shift from help to labour to make the acquired finance feel deserved in a capitalist system.

To find (fairly) disconnected social groups, we search internationally. Images about other nations are being discursively constructed throughout history of global politics (Said 1978). To escape from post-colonial stereotyping and hierarchical binary oppositions in international relations, we focus on the societies that have not found themselves in a direct colonial relationship. Similarly to the "helping" paradigm, we hereby criticise the current donation system characterised by post-colonial problems of representation (Erikson Baaz 2005), dependency and a created inferiority complex (Fanon 1952).

Project process

On one winter sunday (17.12.2017), a group of Japanese people cook and distribute Onigiri on the streets of Berlin among the panhandlers and metro musicians. Onigiri is a rice ball dish which symbolizes “basic food” in Japanese culture. The social action is crowdfunded via an application Polca by Japanese users.

To maintain identity-free conditions, the only information the crowdfunders receive is that they pay for the services of digital guides, “people who know Berlin streets the best”, who will give tips about the city, tell personal stories, show the never to be seen in Japan specialities, etc. In turn, Berliners are similarly given an Onigiri as a matter of payment to tell stories about their lives and the city to the Japanese overseas. In the end, the crowdfunders can watch the videos and the stories on Instagram project profile and receive postcards “signed by the locals”.

Thus, the communication is mediated and is partly conducted online. As a result, the social groups have neither a direct connection to each other, nor a reference to the stereotyping images they (may) have about each other. The groups are not contraposed psychologically and do not base their limited relationship on hierarchy. For both sides, the experience is rather rewarding with little (or no) ethical afterthoughts.

References

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