

Call for papers for the Annual Conference of the Max Weber Foundation

“Neighborliness in Global Perspective”, Orient Institut Beirut, from 12 to 14 December 2019.

Location: Cairo, Egypt.

Conference outline: Neighborliness in Global Perspective

Neighborly relations are the most contingent relations in the triad kinship-friendship-neighborhood. Neighbors are close because they live close, not because we feel close to them as in friendships or are related to them through bonds of kinship. Neighborhoods came into being when humans decided to settle instead of roam; they can be found throughout history until this very day in (and between) villages and cities. In a wider and mostly political sense the concept of neighborhood is also employed with regard to countries, world regions and continents (and in the future probably also between planets).

If the neighbor is not a friend and not a relative how can our relationship with her/him be described? What is the difference between the neighborliness between neighbors, the affectionate friendliness between friends and the love and obligations between relatives and how do these play out in different epochs and cultures?

For Max Weber, interested in rational social action, neighborliness is an unsentimental, economically inspired brotherliness, the neighborhood some kind of unpathetic brotherhood in the economic sense. The neighbor then is the typical “helper in need”. The unspoken ethic of neighborliness in this sense is the rather sober principle of “do ut des” – “do unto others as you would have them do unto you”.

Yet, the desperate and bitter outcry “We were neighbors!” which can be heard long after civil wars ended hints clearly to the fact that the ethic of neighborliness is strong and its violation leaves deep and lasting scars in the communities.

The spatial character and the enforced closeness of shared space make the neighborhood boundaries special boundaries, sensitive of touch. The neighbors next door, i.e. the immediate neighborhood space is an extension of one’s personal space – to transgress it or to come too close to it is almost a violation of one’s body, at the least a source of stress. There are no security zones between neighborhoods as with state borders – but a neighborhood border can end up looking like the Belfast peace lines or Beirut’s green line during the respective brother-wars. Yet, while neighborhood problems can be indicative of larger problems, it takes more to arrive at a situation of war. Neighborhood then, it can be argued, is thus primarily the locus of the political, it is not in itself political.

How have states and municipalities in different times and places regulated neighborhoods to maintain security and order, prevent violence and keep up “good neighborliness”? From, for example, Ottoman mahalles, Arab haras and hayys, kasbahs under colonial rule to housing cooperatives in the Eastern Block intricate regulations and rules were enforced, often through local agents, themselves neighbors.

From the perspective of the neighborhood: What are the cultural rules and rituals meant to enact good neighborliness? Practices of hospitality, especially in inhospitable environments, are a case in point. How have neighborhoods organized neighborliness and solidarity in precarious conditions? What strategies were developed by neighborhoods to protect themselves against those outside their boundaries, from poor neighborhoods to those of the affluent? What are striking examples of historical good neighborliness – from, for example, rebuilding collectively someone’s burnt-down barn in a village or hiding neighbors in danger, thus possibly risking one’s own life? What kinds of

neighborhood initiatives can serve as examples that neighborhoods can possibly also themselves be political actors?

Neighborhood space is not private space nor public space. It is a floating in-between space. The neighbor is the alien living close to us. Neighbors constantly gossip about and spy on each other. World literature is full of tales about the stranger next door as an object of fascination and desire, or as a menace. Romeo and Juliet stemmed from the same neighborhood. Naguib Mahfouz set his most famous novel in a Cairo neighborhood. Currently, popular soap operas (“Friends”, “Desperate Housewives”, “Lindenstrasse”, “Tales of our Neighborhood”) tell stories about neighbors in modern cities in the US, Berlin and Istanbul. At the same time, it can be argued, they thematize both the longing for and the survival of neighborliness in the anonymous urban space of today. What are similarities and differences in cultural productions on neighborliness and the neighbor?

Neighborly relations thus share the same paradox as all other relations: Closeness breeds also hatred, contempt, violence. The paradoxical proximity of spatial closeness and social distance which characterize neighborly relations mostly unmitigated by affection (as in friendship and kinship) make them precarious and neighborliness a challenge - and a concept with deeper implications.

Historically, it was the neighbor who inspired theologies of world religions. The neighbor, ‘Nachbar’, ‘voisin’ is ‘der Nächste’ or ‘le prochain’ in the Old Testament. “...thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself” (LEV, 19, 18) refers originally, as has been argued, to the one living close. Later the command was extended to foreigners and immigrants (LEV, 19:34, CEB). Islam also has a strong and well-thought out ethic of neighborliness. How does neighborliness figure in other world religions?

The question of neighborliness thus is also a theological, ethical and political-philosophical one. This makes it a concept apt to reflect on the human capacity of co-existence throughout global history.

Being both deep and concrete and expressing both social realities and aspirations it challenges other concepts currently en vogue as “convivencia” and “cosmopolitanism”.

Contributions from various disciplines, historical epochs and world cultures are invited.

A publication is planned.

Please send abstracts of not more than 500 words until September 30 to:

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The Annual Conference of the Max Weber Foundation provides a forum for the foundation’s institutes and their research topics, as well as for other partner institutions. The event is organized and hosted by a different institute each year and offers the opportunity for an exchange of different international, comparative and transregional perspectives on current academic issues. Since 2015 it takes place on an annual basis.

Each conference is accompanied and documented by a blog, which contains information about program and speakers in advance as well as the conference papers subsequently.