

Domination on the spot

A brief look into the heart of darkness

In the great ancient stories domination is easy to identify: When in the “Lord of the Rings” evil-eyed Sauron tries to set the people of Middle-Earth under his command, it’s quiet obvious that there are good and bad, free and oppressed, rulers and followers. But how about reality?

Suppose, Germany is going to war again, transportation of nuclear waste is carried out forcibly, police shoots demonstrators and the fundamental right of freedom of expression is set aside temporally, like at the NATO-summit in Munich in January 2002: Even without Sauron domination sometimes appears clearly visible. But beyond such occasions it often seems everything else but clear where, when and how our lives are dominated by others and which are the mechanisms that support domination.

For taking a brief look behind the dense thicket of social states and relations in which domination is embedded, the subject shall be considered on two fundamental questions: “What is domination?” and “How does domination work?”.

Thanks to many years of emancipative social movements we don’t need to invent the spectacles for our analysis anew: On one hand we’re able to refer to a variety of already developed aspects. On the other hand we can focus on certain qualities and details our glasses seem to be most useful for. For what’s the use of glasses that look quiet fashionable but got dirty lenses? And what’s the use of glasses which lenses are manufactured with great precision but are too heavy to move under?

One ring to rule them all? – Capitalism vs. Sexism vs. Racism vs. ...

Recently Frau Lieselotte Meier had to fill in a form. She had to put a cross on several different categories: male/female; slim/overweight; below 50 years/above 50 years; handicapped/not handicapped; sporting/not sporting; heterosexual/homosexual; with EC-passport/without EC-passport etc.

To some of the categories she was already used to (“Female, of course.”). Others seemed a little unusual to her but were easy to fill in (with EC-passport; not handicapped; heterosexual). But then she got upset: “Sporting or not sporting; slim or overweight – it’s an impudence! Shall I become stigmatised? And how about my age? Am I too old, being 53?”

Frau Meier feels uncomfortable and somehow discriminated in answering the question referred to her age. On the other hand she’s not handicapped and does not need to have any fear of being discriminated in this way.

Domination manifests itself in very different aspects of social life. But for any emancipative effort it’s necessary to criticize and fight *all* these different aspects of domination – sexism or racism just as discrimination of handicapped people. A restriction to one single form of domination and it’s analytical isolation may lead to fatal consequences: It might occur that dominating social states and relations are reproduced in some of the other social spheres. Frau Meier feels discriminated with the fact that she gets less wages than her husband, though originally both had the same qualification. On the other hand she feels comfortable with her Polish charwomen working for less then 5 €: The one who’s oppressed and dominated in a certain dimension of domination may often be privileged in another. With the intention of

criticizing sexism some “feminists” directly came to advocate for the war in Afghanistan since it was set against the Taliban with their hostility against women.

But such a limitation of analysis towards one single form of domination is not only reaching a deadlock – it is also theoretically dubious. Therefore it’s important to realize that the dominating social states and relations are principally connected, mutually entangled and to the same extend problematical. Thus the mechanisms and effects of capitalist socialization are not restricted to economy but to all spheres of social life. On the other hand racist structures and racist behaviour are not to be explained only by capitalist logic. Even more, there are principles working completely independent of capital, yet being socially fixed and characterized by powerful social implications.

Focusing domination

Only if domination itself is put on the spot, it’s possible to discover common patterns and identical ways of function –of capitalism and racism for example. And by watching the general principles domination is based upon, also less “prominent” dominating social states and relation come into focus – for example hostility against gay people, ageism or discrimination of so-called handicapped people.

Thus, it will also be possible to recognize one’s own entanglement and position within the thicket of domination: As a woman, Frau Meier is excluded from many a good professional and social position. At the same time she’s privileged from her European passport and from the fact that many other people neither have such a passport nor the included privileges. Therefore breaking the racist consensus in Germany does not *only* mean to oppose against the legal prohibition of free movement for refugees, against the deportation of people or against the practise of imprisoning people into so-called internalisation camps – It’s also an important goal to become aware of our own privileged position as “white” people in a racist society and to overcome this state of power.

Points of view or Three sides of a medal

What is domination?

Sauron, the Lord of the Rings, has orks and black riders at his disposal. Frau Meier has got her charwomen. And the boss of Frau Meier has got her labour, which is depreciated by her motherhood. Social structures, rules and roles urge Frau Meier to go to work and she’s got hardly any choice but doing so. Thus the relation between the bosses and “their” Frau Meiers is secured by more than a personal relationship – and this is exactly what characterizes domination. Glasses which enable us to make out the different dimensions of domination should also allow us to change between different points of view.

The bird’s-eye view: Socially appearing forms and structures

Many (political) theories and strategies end in looking at domination only from the level of it’s *social appearance*. The most prominent example at present time are huge parts of the so-called anti-globalisation movement: Instead of criticizing neo-liberalism as the currently leading form of capitalism in general, it’s seen as the actual root of poverty and unequal distribution of wealth. Another example concerns the limitation of gender politics to quotas on certain social positions.

Other theories go one step further by bringing the underlying *social structures* into mind. They criticize, for example, hierarchical class-structures, the organisation of the market (in it’s

neo-liberal state) and the resulting social relations of mutual competition. Referred to the question of gender this approach means, for example, to criticize patriarchy, the hierarchical system in which gender is socially embedded or gender-specific division of labour. These theories, setting the eye on social structures and their appearance, are necessary to grasp domination in its social context. But they're by no means sufficient in order to criticize and alter domination radically.

The X-ray view: What's underlying domination?

In addition it seems important to look behind the socially appearing forms of domination and their structural attachment: Domination is based on *basic principles* that everyone perceives as unalterable and normal – just like a quasi-natural law. These principles are not objects of immediate material experience. Nevertheless they are that much internalised by all individuals that they become a definite reality and take a strong influence on our daily thoughts, decisions and actions.

There are different structural principles underlying dominating social states and relations. For every respective form of capitalism, for example, it's essential to measure everything and everyone in terms of value and to increase present values by utilizing them in the process of production. Yet the fact that every abstract thing (like labour) as well as every concrete thing (like a washing machine) possesses value, seems to be trivial and simply "true" to us.

Just as trivial it seems to choose between the Gents and the Ladies at evening in the pub: The basis of patriarchy and sexism is the construction of two sexes and the necessity to fit in this duality. That means on one hand, that we're used to divide people into two social groups – according to their sex and *not* according to other characteristics like the shape of their ears-lobes. On the other hand the distinction between two sexes forces us to place ourselves constantly and unequivocally in one of these categories – by choosing the "right" door at a public toilet or putting a cross on an official form, for example.

But already the characteristic question referred to the sex of a newborn baby ("Is it a girl or a boy?") with all its implications of defined roles, chances and possibilities shows the significance of those constructions connected with the question of gender. Without the dual construction of gender, patriarchal social states and relations would simply be unimaginable, since it's only possible to put things in an hierarchical order if once they're considered as objects with distinctive qualities.

The everyday life view: A 5 € cleaning job How we and others experience domination

After all, domination is a matter of individual experience: Those basic principles described above, their structural attachment and their social appearance are perceived as concrete restrictions and as determination by others in everyday life.

For the polish charwomen without EC-passport a "regular" employment is almost out of reach, since "she's got to be glad about whatever she gets". For Lieselottes transsexual daughter Martin the otherwise trivial act of using a public toilet becomes the same horror as the strange looks from people who finally want to know "what she is". Because of the legal prohibition of free movement, emigrants are not allowed to leave a certain district. And the cuts in social welfare decide about the question, if the daughter takes part in the excursion at school or if one's able to treat a friend to a coffee.

In our opinion, all of these points of view – that is, all of the three sides of the medal – are necessary and relevant to identify, name and fight domination. But many people and groups restrict themselves to only one of these viewpoints. Humanitarian organisations or Christian associations, for example, usually concentrate on the everyday life view: In this sphere, they use to do quite remarkable things – but they do it without referring to the most substantial roots of a current misery and without striving for changes which go beyond the individual. Other political circles use to stress exclusively on the underlying mechanisms that determine the existing social states. From that point of view, protests against unequal distribution of social wealth are often considered as a trifle or a counter-revolutionary act. From *our* point(s) of view, a policy which underestimates individual experiences and social appearances places itself in an elitist position. In other words: One has to be in a privileged position at dismissing resistance against the cut of social welfare as “peanuts”.

[bubble 1] **Special filters or Supporting pillars of the tight network**
How does domination work?

Dominating social states and relations can be observed from different points of view. Yet positions for political strategies and campaigns can be sharpened by taking into account, how domination is realized and mediated concretely. That is to ask, which refractory mechanisms lead to the fact that self-determination is hardly anywhere to find.

For getting an idea of how domination works and of what it is that apparently gives domination that strong power of self-preservation, it pays to equip our analytical glasses with different filters. These shall enable us to consider separately central mechanisms of domination which usually are quiet difficult to sort out.

[bubble 2] On one hand, domination manifests itself as **direct force** intending to maintain valid, which means “dominating” rules: While direct force in the shape of physical force is quite common on interpersonal level, it’s completed by the State’s increasing use of corrective, so-called “clean” force, like in case of the police. Another distinct example are the global military operations of the NATO, pretending to be “acts of humanism”.

[bubble 3] Less visible on the first sight, but no less restrictive than direct force is **structural force**. Every form of social inequality, for example, and – as a specific connection between structural and direct force – **existential dependence** counts for this kind of domination. Existential dependence means that individuals or groups in social relations of any kind are not able to dissolve the relation whenever they want to. Different to direct force, it’s not a matter of direct intervention: It’s “only” that almost every alternative to one’s current life, work etc. seems out of reach.

For the performance of structural force the State is playing a leading role – in the restriction of objects and subjects at peoples free disposal as well as in the protection of private property and in the guaranty of legal protection. As an institutionalised guarantor of the dominating states, the State is an important target for our emancipative struggle.

[bubble 4] By considering themselves as “closed” and defining on which certain qualities it depends that people are included/excluded, groups practice domination as **discrimination**. Discrimination appears at work as well as in families, in education or by law. Thus it’s based in very different ways on real or simply constructed characteristics. From this point of view, characteristics of great social significance are, for instance, gender, ethnic ascriptions or class attributes. Furthermore, discrimination is carried out by distinctive clothing and behaviour or by dominating social standards like the bourgeois ideal of the nuclear family.

[bubble 5] From the daily news it's getting quiet clear: **Control of the public** is one of the most central and important mediums of domination; Money and power (from money) are the very criteria that decide about the use of the media. Debates and analyses that set the dominating ideology as absolute, make the effort of an emancipative resistance difficult, because they're inherited, echoed and put in practice by all affected individuals. Increasingly, inconvenient and deviating opinions are absorbed by the dominating public opinion, thus pretending to be multi-optional and fundamentally critical, but actually choking and drowning resistant positions.

At present, this subject can be observed in case of the World Economic Forum (WEF), pretending to have considered the demands of the so-called anti-globalisation movement and to have discerned "Africa's basic problems" – therefore, the inconvenient protests against their policies are to be regarded invalid. Now the solution favoured by the WEF leads into an expansion of free trade, while the deviating concepts of some hundred thousand critical voices are covered by the enforced medial embracement.

[bubble 6] Just like the mechanisms by which domination is realized and carried, dominating social states and relations are continuously protected by the fact that all individuals have inherited them and that they stabilize them by their daily action – though surely this is less relevant in case of the victims of direct force. In contrast to the great ancient stories, domination is not to be understood in narrow schemes of rulers and ruled – though in concrete social situations these roles sometimes actually do exist.

The enforced commitment of any individual to any dominating order must be abolished!