

– Departmental Colloquium – Summer Semester 2021 –
“Refugees: Constructions of displacement, loss and healing”



**The Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology
of the Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität
is glad to welcome**

Roberto Beneduce (University of Turin)

Wednesday, July 14th 2021, 4-6 p.m.

Refugees and postcolony: foreign frontiers of truth and future

According to Foucault (Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling) juridical procedures of justice and truth, and the paradigm of ‘confession’ have been crucial in building the Western subject and contemporary forms of subjectivity within the modern nation-state. Based on Dumezil’s idea that ‘truth speech’ is one of the most important verbal weapons, Foucault’s ‘political and institutional ethnology of truth-telling’ aimed to study the relationship between the act of truth-telling and the determination of justice and truth (la parole de justice). My question is about the current procedures for recognition of asylum and the kinds of subjectivities that they are building. What form of ‘subjectcraft’ they are moulding? However, the first lines of Foucault’s book don’t speak about criminal acts but of another scene: of a late 18th century psychiatrist who wanted the mad to confess his madness and accept the doctor’s truth (and power). Taking this scene I move toward another, associated dialectic: Wrong-Believing, Truth-Telling, where the first term concerns the narratives that refugees give about the reasons for their escape and their request for humanitarian protection. Working specifically on asylum seekers coming from sub-Saharan Africa, I want to analyse the ‘strange’ matter of their tales, as well as the attitudes of the commissions for humanitarian protection that often consider them ‘not credible’ and ‘inconsistent’. If what is happening here is a conflict between different kinds of rationality and narrative styles, and the suspicion of manipulated information, then another struggle appears: one between different orders of experience, different epistemologies and body ontologies. I would like to inquire into what I see as just another form of ‘subjugated knowledge’ (Foucault) and, at the same time, as a singular expression of ‘dedomination’ (dédomination; Eboussi Boulaga). The cases I discuss, taken from my ‘Fanonian’ ethnography with refugees and asylum seekers coming from Mali, Central African Republic, Ivory Coast and so on, aim to enlighten another issue. Their stories often reference mystical threats, witchcraft and fetishes, as they manifest their (real) anxieties to their interlocutors. Like traces of an uncolonized cultural space (Okri) they need to be explored from at least two perspectives. First, these issues suggest that what we can define as a ‘return of culture’, is even a form of resistance to Western grammars of truth, reality, fiction, the oneiric, and maybe also a ‘recapture of the initiative’ (reprise d’initiative), to quote Balandier. Second, given the contemporary context of increasing racism, bureaucratic and institutional violence and necropolitics (Mbembe), I see the narratives of many refugees and immigrants, and their behaviour that health workers sometimes define as just ‘symptoms’, to be a true political knot. In other words, I consider their words as traces of overlapping memories and blurred experiences, speaking at once about the present and the past. Are these ‘suspect narratives’ an effort to reimagine and redraw the future?

The Departmental Colloquium Series will take place online. Information about online access will be announced in due course.

Everybody is welcome!