Editorial

When the at the time fancy approach of a History from Below became popular more than 60 years ago, there was already a tradition of (often romanticising) regards on various interventions by ordinary people in history, but the new approach was right from the beginnings serious about analysing their specific circumstances, their world view and their (often limited) ability to influence major policy. What was needed were proper deeply digging analyses of outstanding moments in which the many and the unknown could really determine the direction in which future policy could be made. It is no coincidence that History from Below was particularly successful in the depiction of revolutionary situations, because this is where the sources were more abundant, telling of temporary political successes. But at the same time, this new field of research, which also became a forerunner of later cultural history, made it clear that the conspicuous and important role of the masses in memory was not limited to uprisings and political unrest. Rather, with their practices and their everyday use of language (or its shifts to components of new world views), they shifted the frames of what could be said and accepted in their societies and their interactions with other societies. This linguistic turn in the History from Below had, however, hard times to meet productively with the social history tradition the original approach took most of its inspiration.

May it as it be, the focus on what the ordinary people felt and spoke about has led step by step to a de-heroisation of many images of history and undermined the pedestals of many a hero of national or imperial history.

It is perhaps all the more surprising that the history of decolonisation has so far been mostly spared from this trend. This may have something to do with the fact that the activists of decolonisation appeared marginalised and subaltern in the imperial context of previous rule, causing a seemingly unshakeable dominance to falter and ultimately disappear. But it was also the basis for a new heroic image of history, which hardly corresponded to the reality of conditions after the end of formal colonial rule or so-called flag independence.

This is why it seems so important to explore the everyday perceptions of ordinary people and to contrast them with the heroic statues of decolonisation, which attempt to construct a connection between the leaders of decolonisation and the people on their own

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and make it socially effective according to their interests and world-views. However, the moment of liberation from colonial rule is distant in historical memory and plays less of a role in coping with everyday life in the twenty-first century than it did in the period of great hopes of awakening in the 1960s and 1970s.

This thematic issue appears shortly after the elections in South Africa, in which the ANC lost its absolute majority for the first time since the end of apartheid, making it clear how great the disappointment over unfulfilled hopes and the continuing, if not growing, social inequality has become. At the same time, the question arises, which is posed in the introduction to this issue, as to whether it was such a dramatic disappointment of previously cherished hopes, or whether the anti-colonial activists and, after flag independence, the ruling elites projected their optimism onto the "masses" and inserted it into a script, which research followed all too readily instead of ascertaining in larger opinion polls and oral history projects what the "people" actually thought and felt, aspired to, and considered to be of secondary importance.

Doing this ex post is laborious and can only be achieved by means of a methodically complicated approach, of which the articles in this issue bear witness. The History from Below remains as necessary as it is difficult. It is easily demanded and appears to be an almost self-evident requirement of modern historiography, and yet it is difficult to fulfil. However, as the example of the popular attitude towards decolonisation in various African societies shows, it can help to relativise exaggerated expectations, to make a more precise distinction between what the people want and what their self-appointed representatives ascribe to them, and to give today's demands of the so-called ordinary people more attention and a historical legacy.

There is no need to emphasise that neither the people nor the ordinary people are a category characterised by homogeneity; the problem accompanies all political movements and academic endeavours dedicated to the question of the aspirations of this elusive mass. In this respect, it only remains to turn to individual facets, a women's movement and a youth organisation, the employees of multinational companies or the presumed readers of a press clipping, to mention examples from this issue. It takes the discovery of special sources, such as private correspondence or comics with a known circulation among ordinary people, to get closer to how the sociologically difficult-to-grasp people interpreted the reality of their lives. The closer we get to the present, the more numerous these sources are, but the greater their gaps, because their systematic collection has yet to be recognised as a task. This does not mean that the case is hopeless, on the contrary, but it requires an institutionalisation that History from Below briefly experienced during the 1960s and 1970s, but has largely lost again since the late 1980s.

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