

## **Politics without parties? Moisei Ostrogorski and the Crisis of Party Democracy**

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### **Application term**

2018-2019 academic year (September 1<sup>st</sup> 2018 – June 30<sup>th</sup> 2019)

### **Host institution**

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### **Abstract**

The Russian political scientist Moisei Ostrogorski (1854-1921) undoubtedly counts among the four or five truly undisputed classics of party research in the 20th century. In his main work *La démocratie et l'organisation des partis politiques*, published in 1903, he compared the political systems of the United States and Great Britain. Ostrogorski discovered a sort of iron law of the oligarchy, according to which the organized party machinery would necessarily dominate its social and parliamentary base. This led to the formation of bureaucratic-hierarchical structures and thus to the downfall of democracy. The author therefore demanded the abolition of all permanent parties and their replacement by spontaneous *ad hoc* alliances (“Down with the party and up with the league.”). His famous hypothesis that the party organization allegedly has a natural tendency towards de-democratization marks the decisive starting point for the entire European party criticism from the 19th century to the present.

My project has two main objectives: Against the background of the renewed vehement criticism of the supposedly undemocratic structures of political parties, the historical recourse to Ostrogorski recalls the emergence of party sociology as “crisis diagnosis” (Ebbighausen 1969: 12). Furthermore the study is also intended to demonstrate the potential for stimulus provided by the author’s classic theories and concepts for our current debates on the crisis of party democracy. Are political parties really the only way to organize democracy in the future? Thus, his provocative demand for a general abolition of parties is to be constructively applied here by investigating possible party reform approaches, (partial) alternatives as well as deliberative or direct democratic additions to the existing representative organization of political interests.

### **Keywords**

Political History of Democracy, Comparative Politics, Political Sociology, Party Systems of USA and Great Britain, Party criticism, Alternatives to political parties.

## Why Ostrogorski?

Not only the election of Donald Trump as the President of the United States, the Brexit or the last Bundestag election have given many people the impression that democracy is in a crisis. Traditional party alignments erode, and fewer and fewer people go to the polls or get directly involved in parties. At the same time, the confidence of voters in parties and parliaments decreases. The Global Trust Report 2017 shows that more than 80% of respondents in Germany have little or no confidence in parties. Against this backdrop, the latest good results of the anti-establishment party AfD (Alternative for Germany) are not surprising. That is why the call for “democratic innovations” (Geißel/Newton 2012) is getting louder.

However, these symptoms are not solely German phenomena and they are not new. On the contrary criticism of political parties is as old as parties themselves. It was Hannah Arendt who once remarked that Great Britain was the only country in Europe where Parliament was not despised and the party system not hated (cf. Arendt, 1973: 251). Besides France this observation seemed especially true of Germany, where general prohibitions and legal restrictions of the freedom of speech, assembly and association still hindered the emergence and development of party organization throughout the entire 19<sup>th</sup> century. Even the word “*Partei*” traditionally had a bad sound. Given this party prudery Klaus von Beyme aptly spoke of the “history of a discriminatory term” (von Beyme, 1978: 732). Thus, the central topoi of party criticism have essentially always remained the same:

- Parties are an expression of special interests in conflict with the common good.
- Ruling parties develop into a cartel or oligarchies, which are closed to new political competitors.
- Parties exert an impermissible obligation on the individual representatives (“party discipline”), which counteracts the free mandate.
- Parties are vulnerable to corruption, nepotism and patronage.
- ... (cf. Alemann 2017: 54 f.).

Hence, recently even a “party paradox” in representative democracy was diagnosed in a German jurisprudential habilitation on the subject. The political parties were at the same time the “most useful servants and the most self-serving lords for the process of democratic rule.” “We cannot be without them, but we cannot be with them either” (Towfigh 2015: 16). However, the fact that parties make democracy possible in the first place (by the organization of the many), but at the same time jeopardize it (by the undemocratic tendencies of party machinery) was the quintessence of a pioneering study published by the Russian political scientist and later Duma deputy Moisei Ostrogorski as early as the turn of the last century. Ostrogorski (1854-1921) compared the early party systems of the United States and Great Britain and drew general conclusions on the future of party democracy. There were no good prospects.

In his opus magnum *La démocratie et l'organisation des partis politiques*, published in 1903, the author proclaimed a sort of an iron law of the oligarchy, according to which the organized party bureaucracy was necessarily detached from its social and parliamentary base. This would lead to the formation of oligarchic structures and thus to the downfall of democracy. Ostrogorski therefore demanded the general abolition of all parties and their replacement by spontaneous *ad hoc* alliances. His hypothesis that party organization naturally

has a tendency towards de-democratization was taken up, by Robert Michels and Max Weber, among others, and popularized with enormous latitude. Recent research has also confirmed the continuing relevance of his observations. Ostrogorski's work thus forms nothing less than the decisive point of the European party criticism from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> century (see Siri 2012: 48 ff., 113 ff.).

### **Key questions and objectives of the project**

The research stay at the CES is intended for the purpose of work on my habilitation thesis in the area of political science. This project follows Ostrogorski's pioneering study in two ways:

(1) Against the background of the renewed vehement criticism of the supposedly undemocratic structures of political parties, the historical recourse to the classic Ostrogorski recalls the emergence of party sociology as a "crisis diagnosis" (Ebbighausen 1969: 12). This impulse is directed not least against the present domination of purely empirical, in some cases overly objectivistic and value-neutral research approaches within party research. Instead, Ostrogorski's critical approach brings the question of power as a key concept of an up-to-date political sociology of the parties back into the focus of examination (cf. Wiesendahl 2017: 33 ff.). This could be called the *archive* function of the study.

(2) Over and above the historical reconstruction of Ostrogorski's ideas the project is also intended to demonstrate the potential for stimulus by the author's classic theories and concepts for our current debates on political parties and the "party state". The question is whether the parties can maintain their privileged position in representative democracy or what alternatives to the existing organization of political interests would be conceivable. His radical call for an abolition of all parties is to be used constructively here. Going beyond Ostrogorski the interest is on a systematic combination of participatory, deliberative and representative procedures in the sense of an extension of our argumentative *arsenal*.

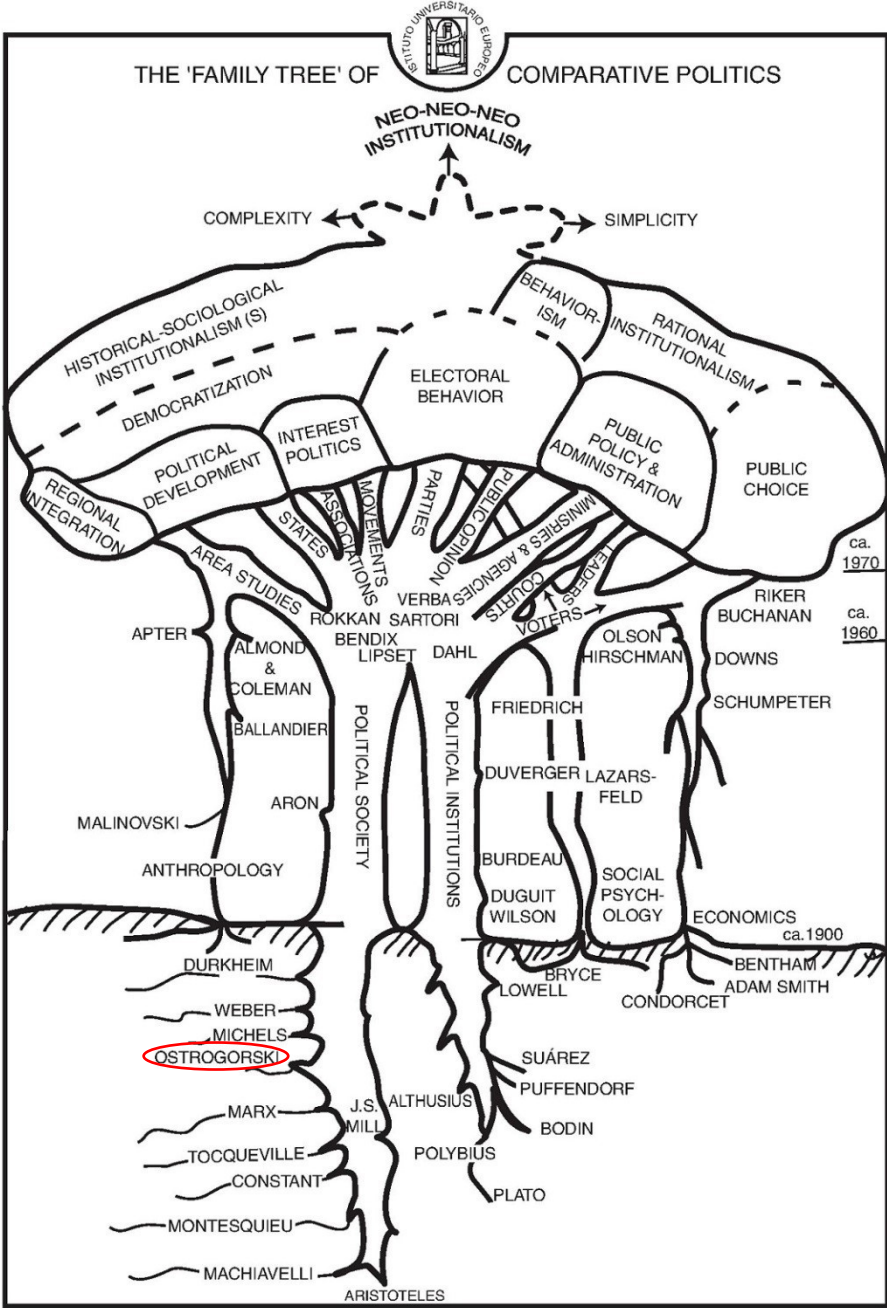
### **Why study Ostrogorski at CES?**

Now, why is exactly Harvard University's Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies the ideal place to study Ostrogorski? There are three main reasons: a substantive, a methodological and a biographical one.

First and foremost, the party system of the USA is Ostrogorski's prime example illustrating the general traits inherent in democratic mass parties under the conditions of universal suffrage. He points out four basic characteristics: permanence of the party organization, domination by small cliques of "wire-pullers", the almost religious devotion and loyalty demanded of party members and the tendency of parties to develop their real centers of power outside the formal government (cf. Ranney 1962: 116 ff.). Thus, the thorough analysis of the American case constitutes the groundwork for a *substantive* theory of party organization and of bureaucracy. So my first aim is to study the party system of the United States on the ground through the lens of Ostrogorski's classic theories and concepts.

Secondly, based on the example of the US, Ostrogorski formulated hypotheses which could then be transferred to Great Britain and other European countries, whose political systems also underwent the process of democratization at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, Ostrogorski was one of the first authors to apply comparative methods in social sciences at all, which was ground-breaking for the *methodological* development of modern social sciences. He finds himself on the deepest root of the “genealogical tree” of comparative politics.

**Figure 1: Ostrogorski on the genealogical tree of Comparative Politics**



Source: Schmitter 2009: 37

Today, CES is one of the greatest places for intellectual stimulation and exchange in the field of comparative politics. Furthermore my project would be a good fit for the research program at Harvard University called “Politics Through Time”, which is a hub for social

scientific research on the political history of democracy and political accountability led by CES Resident Faculty member Prof. Daniel Ziblatt, with whom I have already made contact.

Finally, the development of central elements of Ostrogorski's party sociology can be traced by his academic career and *biography*, since they arise in the direct institutional and intellectual environment of Harvard University and in contact with Harvard professors. Ostrogorski travelled the United States for several years and became part of an Anglo-American intellectual network, which included alongside the well-known British historian James Bryce the long-standing president of Harvard University, Lawrence Lowell (cf. Pombeni 1994). In a letter to Bryce dated 24<sup>th</sup> December 1898 Ostrogorski not only gave an exciting insight into his enormous reading stint and fieldwork methodology, but also emphasized the central significance of his trip to Boston in completely transforming the original version of the American part of his book:

“[T]o get a glimpse at the situation I spent in the States a good deal of time, travelling over the country, attending party conventions, hobnobbing with Bosses, and working in libraries, chiefly in the splendid Boston public library [!] [...] The result was that I decided to take up all the work and that turned out tremendous task. I had to go through all the historical literature from the beginning of the Union etc. [...] But now I cannot retreat and must finish the reshaping of the American part on the new plan, which of course will be more valuable in my opinion [...]” (Ostrogorski 1898 quoted by Quagliariello 1996: 31)

With the generous possibilities of a John F. Kennedy fellowship I would like to follow Ostrogorski's trail to Boston: What exactly did he read in the Public Library? With whom did he meet and talk? What kind of empirical material did he collect at the party conventions of that time? And of course which insights gained at Harvard made him decide to reshape the whole manuscript on the US party system? Most of this author's American adventure has never been told before.

### **What do we know about Ostrogorski?**

Everybody knows Ostrogorski, but nobody has read him. In terms of his significance as one of at most four or five genuinely unquestioned classics of international party research, there is astonishingly little literature on the author and his work. As far as I can see, there is not a single monograph on Ostrogorski in the German or the entire English-speaking world – the only exception, if you will, is an English translation from the Italian done 20 years ago of the dissertation by Gaetano Quagliariello (cf. Quagliariello 1993, English translation 1996). Furthermore, we still know very little about Ostrogorski's life, especially about the perennial research stays in England and the USA in the 1880s and 90s, which preceded the publication of his main work. During this time the author published several important articles in American political journals, which anticipated the central theses of his later book (cf. Ostrogorski 1899 and 1893). Only the introduction that Quagliariello wrote to the Italian translation of Ostrogorski's book brought some light to this important creative period (cf. Quagliariello 1991). Previously, biographic research was essentially based on the very incomplete and partly erroneous data in the Encyclopedia of Social Sciences (cf. Macmahon 1933) and some biographical information from contemporary reviews of his work (see Finley 1903, Macy 1911).

However, Ostrogorski's actual influence, especially on Anglo-American political science, can hardly be surpassed. In the 1960s, America also was the starting point of a first little

Ostrogorski renaissance, which was decisively stimulated by Seymour M. Lipset's new edition of Ostrogorski's two-volume masterpiece (Lipset 1964). Previously, Austin Ranney (1962) had already honored Ostrogorski by accepting him as the only non-American in his ancestral gallery of the country's most important party researchers. For British political history, Ostrogorski's status as a classic author was confirmed by Robert McKenzie (cf. 1964: 5).

In addition to the profound and detailed analysis of the party systems of Britain and the USA, Ostrogorski's methodical approach is generally acknowledged as a breakthrough. The paradigm shift introduced here from a purely formal political institutionalism to the analysis of the actual behavior of political actors even outside the governmental sphere was often seen as the factual emergence of the social sciences (cf. Lipset 1964: x ff., Butler 1958: 44, Duverger 1959: XII; critical to this point of view Barker/Howard-Johnston 1975). Supposedly even the name of the subject "Political Sociology" was first introduced by Ostrogorski (cf. Ebbighausen 1981: 16).

In electoral research, the "Ostrogorski paradox", which was originally named by Douglas Rae and Hans Daudt (Rae / Daudt, 1976), is also still being discussed. The paradox refers to the fact that, facing several dichotomous issues, choosing issue-wise according to the majority rule may lead to an overall outcome of defeat (cf. Laffond/Lainé 2009, Nermuth 1992, Shelley 1984). In addition to organizational-sociological issues questions of political psychology play a central role here.

Finally, the actual influence of Ostrogorski on Robert Michels (Ebbighausen 1969, Runciman 1963: 71) and Max Weber (Herzog 1966, Lipset 1964: xii, Roth 1963: 252 ff.) was always of particular interest, especially in the German debate. However, Ostrogorski's studies are little known in Germany today. In addition to the greater prominence of his two "pupils", which soon led to the disappearance of the original influence of Ostrogorski (especially since Weber's and Michels' works contained very few references to their intellectual origin), the low visibility of Ostrogorski's work is essentially attributed to the lack of a German translation of his main work (cf. Siri 2015: 513, Stubbe-da Luz 1997: 171 f.).

Originally Ostrogorski had written the two thick volumes of his book containing more than 1300 pages in French language (Ostrogorski 1903). Curiously enough the original version appeared in Paris only a year after an early English translation by Frederick Clarke was published in London 1902. This 115-year-old version, which does not come from the pen of Ostrogorski personally, is the version still used in research today. It was reprinted in unaltered form in 1970 in New York and also served as a basis for the abridged new edition of Lipset in 1964. A German version, even of the French original, does not yet exist. As a part of my habilitation I want to close this research gap.

My study also breaks new ground in another respect. For however much Ostrogorski is usually celebrated for its historical and sociological analyses, his concrete reform proposals for the age of "mass democracy" are just as uniformly rejected. Especially the demand to abolish the permanent parties in favor of spontaneous *ad-hoc* alliances or time-limited "single issue parties" was repeatedly criticized as "unrealistic" or simply "naïve" (Ebbighausen 1969: 34) and not being worth a deeper consideration. From my point of view, however, two aspects were overlooked by this partly legitimate criticism.

On the one hand, in a later revised version of his volume on the American party system, Ostrogorski presented a series of further, far less radical institutional reforms for flank-

ing the “single issue parties”, which are worth a look. Among other things, he wanted to drastically reduce the number of election posts at all levels of government and to bind the deputies more closely to their constituencies. In addition, Ostrogorski pleaded for short periods of office and a permanent potential for recall of all public officials (Ostrogorski 1910: 444 ff.). He was also thinking about the creation of a number of so-called “Associate Senators” (ibid., 453), who would directly represent the great economic interests of the country in Congress and thus eliminate the influence of clientelistic lobby groups.

And on the other hand, I find that Ostrogorski’s deliberative ideal of a democratic society of independent individuals who, on the basis of shared ideas and values, unite freely on certain political issues, in order to discuss public affairs in a rational discourse, has become far less naive and unworldly than it might have seemed 50 or 60 years ago during the era of mighty catch-all parties. The time for Ostrogorski’s ideas might just have begun.

### **Preliminary work and methodological approach**

As we can conclude from the state of the art, Ostrogorski is the best-known unknown (and unread) among the classics of political parties and political sociology. He has remained widely unknown mainly because he as a Russian first wrote in French, secondly because the historical English translation was bad and linguistically inaccessible, and thirdly there is neither a new English translation nor any German translation at all.

To this extent, it seemed appropriate to me to start my habilitation project with the plan of editing the first German translation of Ostrogorski’s main work and on this authentic text basis to pursue a monographic reinterpretation of this important author. The new edition will be realized by the assistance of a professional translator of social science literature (going back to the French original) and will be published with the renowned Mohr Siebeck publishing house, hopefully in time for the 100th anniversary of Ostrogorski’s death in February 2021. Furthermore I plan to organize a scientific conference with international experts on Ostrogorski in autumn 2019, where the various strands of the current reception will be brought together and new perspectives for research will be opened. On this occasion first results of the new German Ostrogorski edition will be presented. I applied for funding for these two prospective subprojects by the Daimler and Benz Foundation in September 2017.

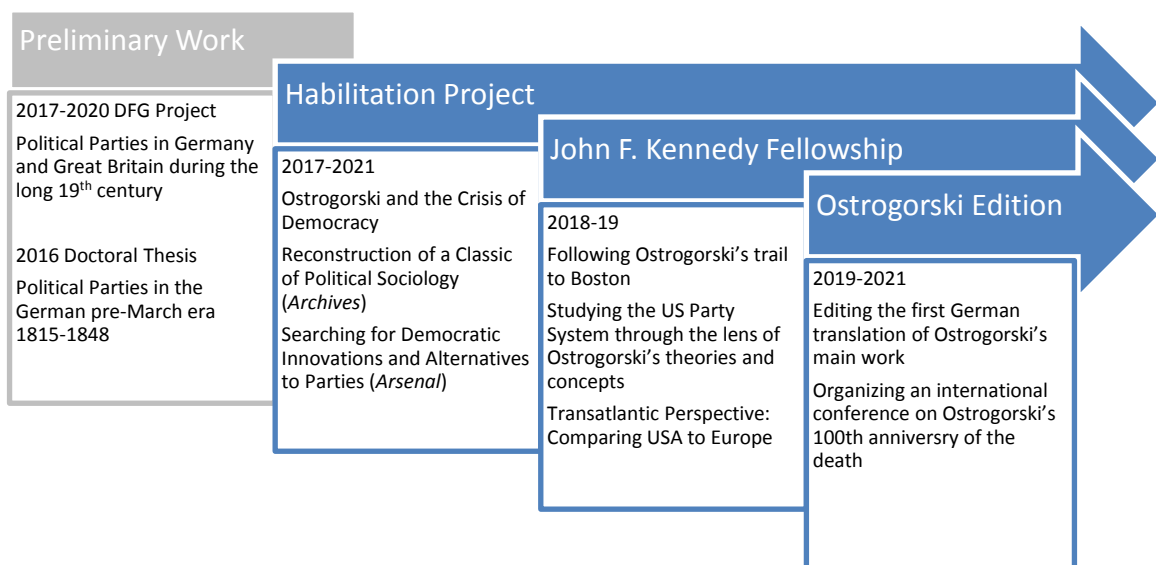
Furthermore, the CES project can build on two successfully research studies, one successfully completed and one ongoing:

(1) My dissertation on the perception of political parties in Germany between 1815 and 1848 argues for a revision of some traditional prejudices in favor of a more benign view on the pre-March concept of political parties. The findings are based on a broad analysis of more than 250 text sources originating from the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The book was awarded the Young Scholars’ Award 2017 by the German Political Science Association (DVPW).

(2) On similar issues a current research project on early party discourse in Western Europe is already underway at the University of Frankfurt (term from 2017 to 2020) funded generously by the German Research Foundation (DFG). Under my leadership this comparative study investigates the perception of political parties in the English and German political philosophy during the “long 19<sup>th</sup> century” (1789-1914) and thus including the publishing of Os-

trogorski’s main work on the political parties<sup>1</sup>. First results here indicate how the influence of English and (to some extent) French constitutional practices and political thought led German writers to an elaborate theory of political parties as early as at the eve of the 1848 German revolution (cf. Erbrant 2017). Some of these ideas would, on closer inspection, probably prove to be an import and re-import of ideas. Within this pan-European laboratory of political and social reform, the analysts observed each other carefully at all times, studying curiously the experiments of their neighbors, and searched for new formulas and models which they could accept or reject for their own prospective research. Not least the sources investigated so far may prove in that sense that party theories can be read as a strand of an early transnational discourse about the future of state and society. Once again, the fruitfulness of comparisons in the humanities and social sciences is shown.

**Figure 2: Project Timeline**



Following Ostrogorski’s methodological insights, I will now expand this approach to the transatlantic perspective. The methodology developed and already successfully applied in the DFG study is essentially also valid for the reconstruction of Ostrogorski’s work. This applies in particular to the dual function of political ideas as an archive and arsenal of political science (cf. Llanque 2008: 1 ff.). This means that the history of democracy research must not be confined to the mere collection and preservation of old ideas – the maintenance of the archive. Instead, the real value of the history of ideas proves itself by its arsenal function, namely by “providing the reflexive material for the discussion of current problems” (Bermbach 1981: 191). By trying to find out what is shaping today and how to bring tomorrow to the future, the history of ideas is “a part of the contemporary interpretative struggle” (Llanque 2008: 3).

<sup>1</sup> A detailed description of this project can be found on the internet at: [http://www.fb03.uni-frankfurt.de/63575254/DFG-Projekt\\_Erbrant\\_Beschreibung-des-Vorhabens.pdf](http://www.fb03.uni-frankfurt.de/63575254/DFG-Projekt_Erbrant_Beschreibung-des-Vorhabens.pdf)



Accordingly, the planned study does not seek its starting point in a self-sufficient, pure reconstruction of past political thought; instead, it would like to reverse those elements of the theory and sociology of political parties which are effective in the present to their origins, (re)gaining new perspectives for future use of these objects. The normative statements of Ostrogorski are to be sorted with regard to three timeless problems concerning political parties:

- (1) With regard to the *functions* attributed to the parties within the political system (and therefore the external perspective)
- (2) the theoretical justification of party *competition* (interim perspective);
- (3) and, finally, the question of the internal party *organization* (or internal perspective)

These three major categories could be further differentiated before the beginning of the actual source work and on the basis of further preliminary considerations into a relatively finely structured heuristic search system for the finding of interesting ideas and arguments within the examined texts. The provisional formulation of these smaller research questions was based on a cursory reading of Ostrogorski's works, the relevant academic literature on Ostrogorski as well as a hermeneutical recording of the central, ever-recurring topoi of current party research. In so far as this approach serves the openness of qualitative methods for the development of the category system, the planned study is a "qualitative content analysis", to some extent following Philipp Mayring (cf. Mayring 2007: 24-41).

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