

Fellows



Andreas Gehrlach
IFK_Research Fellow

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01. October 2020 bis 31. January 2021

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PROJECT TITLE

“Kneel Down, Move Your Lips in Prayer, and You Will Believe”: The Cultural History of Genuflection

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

What happens when someone fall to his/her knees? Kneeling down is one of the most widely known and most obvious gestures of subjection, but a closer look reveals that the act of kneeling is a complex and historically diverse phenomenon. Already in the Gilgamesh Epic, kneeling is described as a bodily technique that one must learn in order to become fully human. That means not merely that kneeling is one of the oldest recorded bodily techniques, but also that our culture is based on the assumption that, in order to become human, one has to submit to the order of hierarchies. Since Alexander the Great introduced genuflection into Western civilization, its reason and function have always been a matter of debate. Even the church fathers Augustine and Thomas Aquinas found themselves compelled to justify why one should kneel during prayer: It is not God who needs such base human acrobatics; it is done purely for humans, to strengthen their devotion to God. Louis Althusser once said, more or less quoting Pascal, that one learns to believe by kneeling and pretending to pray. Althusser thus continued the ancient theological and political line of thought: By kneeling, one internalizes the reason for the gesture itself.

This research project focuses on genuflection and its theoretical, historical, philosophical, and theological implications. Genuflection is seen as a “theoretical scene” that is historically surprisingly stable. The focus extends far beyond the knee as the “organ of obedience,” however, to questions about what exactly hierarchies are and why humans tend to put so much effort into maintaining them. Differences in rank—between humans, gods, genders, or races—are often expressed and affirmed by gestures of subjection that are shown in bodily techniques, pictures, texts, and ceremonies. Looking at this rather unassuming joint between thigh and calf may in fact reveal quite a bit about the very human will to subjection and the will to power.

[TO THE MOVIE](#)

CV

Andreas Gehrlach, born in 1981, studied literature and history in Tübingen and is a researcher at the Institute for Cultural History and Theory at the Humboldt University in Berlin. His doctoral thesis about stories of theft as founding myths was part of a DFG research project on the cultural history of theft at the Friedrich Schlegel Graduate School of the Free University of Berlin and Tübingen. He is the organizer of the Psychoanalytic and Cultural Theory lecture series in Berlin and co-editor of the series *Undisciplined Books*, published by De Gruyter.

He has been a visiting scholar at the University of Chicago and the University of Cambridge. His research focuses on modern and ancient cultural theories and revolves around precarious, criminal, and political economies. He is particularly interested in questions of property, myth, and utopia, as well as questions of the legitimacy and critique of domination.

Publications

Das verschachtelte Ich. Individualräume des Eigentums, Berlin 2020; „Die Macht, die im Schatten liegt. Elemente einer kynisch-performativen Philosophie der Wahrheitsverdunkelung“, in: *Zeitschrift*

für *Kulturphilosophie* 2/2016, S. 367–392; *Diebe. Die heimliche Aneignung als Ursprungserzählung in Literatur, Philosophie und Mythos*, Paderborn 2016.