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Eine Kooperation von:
Imagine. Verein für Kulturanalyse
Institut für Wissenschaft und Kunst
Institut für Soziologie der Universität Wien
Sektion Gesundheits- und Medizinsoziologie der ÖGS
Wiener Psychoanalytische Akademie

7. und 8. Juni 2013

Ort: Wiener Psychoanalytische Akademie
Salzgries 16, A-1010 Wien
<http://un-wohl-gefuehle.univie.ac.at>

Neurotic citizenship, polarisation and controversy around 'medically unexplained symptoms'

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Through the concepts of 'neurotic citizen' and 'governing through neurosis', Engin Isin (2004) has drawn the outline of a figure that complements the subject of neo-liberal governmentality and constitutes its soft underbelly. Where the neo-liberal subject is posited as 'sufficient, calculating, responsible, autonomous and unencumbered', the neurotic subject is 'someone who is anxious, under stress and increasingly insecure and is asked to manage its neurosis'. Far from being mutually exclusive, the two figures imply each other in so far as the heroic demands placed on the neoliberal subject involve an overestimation of its actual coping abilities. In this paper I set this proposition in dialogue with the empirical domain of 'medically unexplained symptoms' ('MUS') and with the cultural dynamics that characterise this field. The paper will offer an analysis of debates on management strategies for MUS patients and of the difficult and sometimes paradoxical relations between tasks of representation and intervention in this field.

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