Report of the 14th Käte Hamburger Lecture

Doing Politics in Translation

with Professor Richard Freeman

8 October 2015, Duisburg
The 14th Käte Hamburger Lecture addressed the topic of ‘Doing Politics in Translation’ and was delivered by Richard Freeman, Professor of Social Science and Public Policy, University of Edinburgh. Embedded in a two-day workshop titled ‘Translation in World Politics’, the lecture took place on the 8th October and was organized by the Käte Hamburger Kolleg / Centre for Global Cooperation Research (KHK/GCR21). Freeman explained through Hannah Arendt’s work ‘The Human Condition’ how politics happen. His lecture placed action (doing) at the centre of the accounts of politics and international relations.

The lecture started with welcoming remarks by Dr. Katja Freistein, Head of Research Unit 1 ‘The (Im)possibility of Cooperation’ at KHK/GCR21, and was commented subsequently by Dr. Noemi Lendvai, Senior Lecturer in Comparative Public Policy, School for Policy Studies, University of Bristol. This was followed by an open discussion with the audience, which was moderated by Dr. Alejandro Esguerra, Postdoc Fellow at KHK/GCR21.

Lecture

Freeman began his talk by referring to the protest movement in 2011, which occupied Zuccotti Park in New York. The camp was equipped with an infrastructure comparable to a city and a process of debating and talking characterized its decision-making process. Freeman stressed that rather than concentrating on the question of what the protesters wanted, the more interesting focus should be on what they were ‘doing’. In his view they were doing politics. He considered the protest to be original politics in two apparently contradictory senses: on the one hand, the way the protest was conducted seemed new and creative as how an artwork is perceived. On the other hand it can be traced back to the origins of human society and their basic problems. In this sense, the protest embodied a very old simple form of addressing politics.

Based on this statement, Freeman constructed his lecture. By asking the questions ‘What does “doing politics” mean? And how is it done?’ he mounted his argument on Tom Burns’s phrase of politics as a mode of doing. Thereby Freeman examined a gap between politics and sociology. While political scientists have worked on action only faintly, sociologists have dealt with politics only little. For an advanced political understanding of action, Freeman leaned his understanding on Hannah Arendt’s philosophical work The Human Condition, especially on her fifth chapter Action. He then briefly outlined Hannah Arendt’s

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interpretation of action and his own critiques through the concept of action; plurality, priority and process; and speech, space and power.

Arendt ascribed politics to the sphere of action. Furthermore, action is ‘what goes on directly between men’. She considered politics to be a special form of action, which does not include the problems of labour and work. In line with other scholars, Freeman disagrees with this perspective, especially with the view that considers ‘doing politics’ to be a higher form of activity or something less essential and not connected with the basic problems of life. Despite this disagreement, he suggested, Arendt’s assumptions about action is conceptually comprehensive and provide a good framework to understand the doing in politics.

Freeman further elaborated that he considered actions to be boundless, uncertain and anonymous. This is due to its holding attributes: plurality, priority and process. Plurality is based on the fact that men live together on earth and their plurality is, hence, a compulsory condition of their political life. To Freeman, while action always means interaction, it is not only influenced by what is real but also by what individual knows is real.

Moreover, action is prior to – but can never be segregated from – actors. The identity of persons is present in their speech and action. However, identity is always preceded by actions. Thus, we learn who the actors are through their actions. As a consequence, Freeman argued, who identity of individuals becomes more intelligible to others rather than to themselves.

Since action takes place in the context of other actions and every action leads to a chain reaction, it has a process character. Freeman continued that the actor appears only in action and therefore the meaningfulness of actor reveals itself fully only to the storyteller. To Freeman, this firstly implies that its outcomes of an action are, due to other actions it induces, unpredictable and uncertain. Secondly, it assumes a narrative, which reveals itself only to the storyteller. The transitory nature of action necessitates a storyteller who witnessed the action and can reify it for others.

He continued by addressing the importance of speech, space and power. According to Freeman, while Arendt named speech and action separately she treated both elements together. He concludes that speech is the most prominent form of political action, that there could be no action without speech. Additionally, action takes place in time and space. Arendt called it the

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2 Arendt separates between the problems of getting food and shelter (labour) and from the production and exchange of things (work).
space of appearance, a defined space, comparable to a stage, where actors appear to each other while doing politics. As the space of appearance is created in and by action, this implies that action produces the space in which it occurs. As soon as the action is over, the space of appearance disappears.

The last concept of Arendt that Freeman operationalized, was power, which is closely connected to the concept of space. Since power only emerges amid the relation between men, the existence of power is bound to space of appearance.

Doing politics: trajectory, transformation, and translation

After extensively discussing Arendt’s concepts, Freeman transferred the conclusions of her work to his analysis of doing politics. Most importantly, he stressed that politics begins in meeting and proceeds in talk and text. To Freeman, politics take place in and over time and space. One action engages and is engaged by others. Moreover, action is constituted by relations of power, similarly it constitutes and reconstitutes those relation. Finally, this leads to an account of action, which is processual, emergent and relational.

Freeman recognises the challenge in identifying the different pieces of doing politics. To capture them he introduced three related concepts: trajectory, transformation and translation. Trajectory is a way of identifying the process of any given action. Transformation captures emergence as well as change, which draw attention to change, but also stability. And finally, translation is based on the making and unmaking of relations. In a communicative process, determined by different social worlds, actors enter into relations with each other and begin to reconstruct themselves, as well as their interests and worlds.

After introducing many concepts from action, space power to trajectory, transformation and translation, Freeman applied his construct to an empirical case. He chose the case of Henry Kissinger, Secretary of State, who went to China six months before Richard Nixon’s visit in 1972. This visit took place in great secrecy with an aim to explore the possibility of a visit of President Nixon. During the weekend, he spent several hours in meetings with Zhou En-lai, Chinese Premier, and further hours when he drafted communiqué with advisors from both sides. For his analysis, Freeman took his knowledge from a detailed and top-secret memorandum, which Kissinger drew up for Nixon. Freeman claimed that this kind of meetings, present what doing politics means: fulfilling the characteristics Arendt describes:

It has trajectories in terms of temporal aspects, determined by the hours of the day, the needs of the human body and the deadline due to Kissinger’s departure
time. Furthermore, it is physical or spatial with regard to travelling across continents and moving between different buildings as well as rooms. In addition, Kissinger was confronted with different interlocutors\(^3\) during his journey and his stay in China, which also represents a trajectory. The last part is the interactions they had during the talks, developed in presentations and counter-presentations. Certainly, Freeman mentioned, the meeting proceeded in a broader trajectory of developments in international relations.

*Transformational aspects* were reflected in the various, and to some extent contradictory, roles Zhou and Kissinger took. Among others they were diplomats as well as politicians, leaders as well as subordinated, opponents as well as collaborators and formal as well as informal. At the same time, these different kinds of role, Freeman explained, meant a different mood. All individuals involved behaved from relaxed and cordial on the one side to worried, anguishing or brooding on the other side. Freeman emphasized particularly the developing relationship between both, which he described as ‘appeared to bond’. Additionally, the meeting was transformational in terms of accounts, which were interpreted and translated on the basis of what was known.

For a start, the last aspect of doing politics – *translation* – was represented in a very straightforward way, by the different languages, which called for interpreters. Yet, Freeman declared, it entailed even more elements. Zhou and Kissinger can be understood as intermediaries between the different interests of their countries and their accounts are their interpretations of the world. Through the representation of meanings, he said, they were revising the relationship between countries. Moreover, translation happened during the difficult drafting of the communiqué in order to represent their meeting to outsiders. Beyond that the memorandum Kissinger wrote and the following talk with the President is considered as a translation as well. Therein, he reported versions and represented interests to Nixon in the form of selected and defined information and thereby redefining what Zhou said.

Finally, Freeman concluded his assumptions that politics consist essentially in meetings, in the talk during the meetings, and in the representation of that talk in form of texts and images. Hence, he claimed that politics is, Arendt described, everywhere about the elements in the immediate relation that people have. In addition, he questioned the status quo that thinks of the international as of something higher and bigger, which is separated from the regional and local. He emphasized, if politics is relational, the focus should be put on interactional rather than studying the international.

\(^3\) But he never talked to Mao because he was reserved to Nixon.
Comments

Following the lecture, Lendvai spoke in high terms of Freeman’s paper. Additionally, she remarked three points. First, she stated, it is an interesting idea to bring action at the centre of understanding politics. However she questioned whether non-action at all exists. As absence and silence is a very strong construct as well, she argued and asked, how absence can be integrated into the analysis. In her second point, she disagreed with Freeman’s statement that action is prior to actors. Lastly, she stressed that while the differentiation between trajectories, transformation and translation appeals to her she questioned how we can deal with the dismissal of alternative terminology.

At the close of the lecture, an intense discussion evolved around the application of Freeman’s analysis construct, its advantages and disadvantages as an analysis of the moment as well as around its purpose. Concluding, Freeman admitted, he looked only at one account, while there are many. As a whole Freeman’s analysis provided a new perspective and impetus for the encompassing workshop.

Report written by Fentje Jacobsen
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