Report of the 25th Käte Hamburger Lecture

Knowledge Production, Area Studies and Global Cooperation

with Professor Claudia Derichs

5th July 2017, Duisburg
In our differentiated and stratified globalized world, different ideas, initiatives and perceptions of global cooperation partly co-exist, and partly clash. This is the starting point for Claudia Derichs’s most recent book, titled ‘Knowledge Production, Area Studies and Global Cooperation’ and published in the Routledge Global Cooperation Series. In the 25th Käte Hamburger Lecture, presenting her arguments from the book, the Centre’s Alumni Senior Fellow Claudia Derichs discussed some of the important methodological and political implications of this insight. Focussing particularly on Asian varieties of Islamic thought and political practice, she offered a detailed view of a context, the perception of which is often overshadowed by orientalist stereotypes in the West. Furthermore, she challenged traditional area studies notions of ‘areas’ and Western political science notions of cooperation. The panel of the 25th Käte Hamburger Lecture included Prof. Dr Claudia Derichs, Chair of Comparative Politics and International Development Studies at the Philipps-Universität Marburg, and the discussants Prof. Dr Florian Coulmas, Senior Professor for Japanese Society and Sociolinguistics at the Institute of East Asian Studies (IN-EAST), University of Duisburg-Essen, and Dr Christian Scheper, Researcher at the Institute for Development and Peace (INEF), University of Duisburg-Essen. Prof. Dr Ina Kerner, Fellow at the Käte Hamburger Kolleg / Centre for Global Cooperation Research (KHK/GCR21) moderated the event.

Following the welcoming remarks by Volker Heins, Co-Head of Research Unit 2 at KHK/GCR21, Ina Kerner introduced the book that was at the heart of this lecture to the audience. Noting that this publication is ‘far from conventional’, Kerner highlighted three aspects why the book stands out. First, it is transdisciplinary, combining among others area studies, literature, international relations, postcolonial studies, gender studies, Islamic studies, Asian studies, and cooperation research. Second, it covers a great number of issues and themes, for example, language and its use, translation, Western knowledge production, Islamic thought and practice, gender and development aid. Thereby the book presents a weaving and complex texture of knowledge production, area studies and global cooperation. Third, it offers a critical assessment of traditional area studies’s notions of areas as well as of Western political science’s notions of global cooperation.

Key Terms and Motivation

At the onset of her lecture, Derichs noted that she avoided giving definitions to key terms used in her book. This is by purpose, Derichs explained with an example of the term ‘knowledge’. The understanding is different according to who defines it, at which point in time, and where. For Derichs, it is important to
hint at the hierarchies that exist in the generation of knowledge as a whole, and knowledge that is conveyed in academia in particular. She further elaborated her argument on the three key terms of the book: Knowledge (production), Area (studies), and (global) cooperation.

**Knowledge (production):** Derichs asked how we arrive at knowledge in general and in social sciences in particular. And related to that, which knowledge is considered as valid and solid, and who decides it? Have we thought about alternative epistemologies? Being more illustrative, Derichs gave an example of a research conducted by Dieter Haller, an anthropologist from the University of Bochum, Germany. In his ‘Pathologies of the West’, Haller points out that 75% of humankind believes in ghosts and spirits. But still, Derichs concluded, the West as mostly non-ghost believers behaves as if they were the majority in the world. Therefore, it is important to analyse why and how hegemonic views of world and world order have come about as well as to understand the power relations behind such views. Subsequently, Derichs presented two examples of different perspectives on world history and global affairs that she uses in her current book to reveal power hierarchies. Taken from history books, the examples illustrate the disrespect of the Western world towards the Muslim world with relation to global history. To Derichs, these are all effective examples of the ignorance towards alternative views and concepts of world history.

In the book, Derichs examines particularly the role of religion in shaping world views and generating feelings of belonging.

**Area (studies):** Derichs questioned if the segmentation of area studies still reflects the reality. What is an area—is it defined by geographical boundaries as area studies teaches us or rather by individuals that are connected through shared values and principles? She criticized that ‘area studies’ are divided in fixed segments based on geography that determine the research in Latin America studies, African studies, Middle East studies etc. This segmentation leads to problems if the work of scholars fails to fit in one of them. Derichs argued that people are not grouped in closed bundles but are connected across borders, e.g. via diasporas, migration, mobility, and emotional feelings of belongings. These translocal connections gain importance. The ‘tunnel vision of area studies’, as Derichs termed, based on the primarily geographical defined areas, has to be balanced to reflect the empirical reality.
Alternative Epistemologies: Islamization of Knowledge

Based on her own research on the Middle East and Asia, Derichs was eager to discover what people in the region find valuable when looking at the world. Consequently, Derichs dedicated two chapters in her book investigating an epistemic approach which she terms ‘Islamization of knowledge’.

(Global) cooperation: On the term of cooperation, Derichs referred to the Centre’s first issue of the Global Cooperation Research Papers that was developed further by Dirk Messner and Silke Weinlich into the first published book in the Routledge Global Cooperation Series. With the basic assumption about the fundamentally cooperative nature of human behaviour, the authors add a behavioural dimension to the global cooperation research. They argue that there are seven basic mechanisms that determine whether or not cooperation is successful or sustainable: reciprocity, trust, communication, reputation, fairness, enforcement and we-identity. The authors derive these mechanisms from laboratory experiments, evolutionary biology, and psychology—hence basically inferences from the natural sciences. These mechanisms are then grouped in a ‘cooperation hexagon’ that summarizes the current consensus about what makes cooperation work. Against these findings, Derichs asked about the non-Western views on cooperation and how modern science neglects spirit and higher order. Through the example of the Iranian philosopher Seyyed Hossein Nasr, she illustrated how the argumentation would greatly differentiate. Born in 1933, Prof. em. Seyyed Hossein Nasr is a very influential Iranian thinker and scholar, who studied philosophy and Islamic science in the USA. He taught in Iran as well as in the USA. His approach to science tries to combine different approaches to knowledge, going beyond the inferences drawn from laboratory experiments and evolution studies. He says in modern science in most of the Western parts of the world the multiple domains of reality are reduced to a relatively psycho-physical domain, neglecting a truth that belongs to a higher order. To Nasr, this is incomplete science as the sacred does not play any role. Therefore, Nasr is convinced that this is superficial science at least to certain extent, and he rejects the claim that secularized knowledge is the only genuine form of science, where quantitative methods are the only valid. For Derichs, the ‘Islamization of knowledge’ falls under this rubric. According to her, Nasr’s epistemic approach to behavioural dimension of cooperation would be a ‘higher source’ that explains why cooperation is inherent in human kind. This

demonstrates that knowledge is depending on epistemic roots and conviction of the scholar.

Ultimately, Derichs stressed the importance to open up for global dialogues, and alternative approaches to knowledge, at least to look what drives people and what shape their world views.

Discussion

‘I want to talk about nothing’, began discussant Florian Coulmas his notes on the lecture. The concept of nothing translated in Arabic numerals is a recent accomplishment. Zero, the idea of nothing being something, has been at first local knowledge that has triumphed into universal knowledge. Nowadays, Coulmas claimed, Western hegemony in science is a matter of fact. Western knowledge has to be thought of as universal because it is superior and universal and because it is hegemonic. According to Coulmas, the argument on hegemony is covered by the Derichs’s book which can be read as an honest attempt to withstand Western hegemony in scientific discourse. Alternative approaches to knowledge are not per se scientific. Coulmas supports the arguments opposing Western hegemony but not without theory building and methodology. Scientists have the obligation to adopt a critical position and challenge hegemonies that are based on power instead of knowledge and research.

In his comments, Christian Scheper touched upon three major issues knowledge production and religion/Islamization, area studies as a discipline and global cooperation. First, he questioned how to study emotional geographies. Taking the example of Islamic economy, Scheper reads the development differently—as capitalization of Islamic values, meaning a contamination of Islamic thought by transnational capitalism. This leads Scheper to the question how to study the process of Islamization and what kind of knowledge is used. Moreover, Scheper asked if emotional geographies can also be found outside of religious ties. Second, Scheper argued that Derichs’s argument of expanding the notion of area by taking into account emotional attachments would not lead to a more radical conclusion that area studies are obsolete. Third, Scheper asked for the concrete recommendation of the book on how to proceed with global cooperation. According to Scheper, the knowledge on the other’s position does not help us agree on a common ground and questions about good life.

Answering to the various questions raised by the discussants, Derichs agreed that Islamization of knowledge is a failure. But it trickled down so that the assertion of being a Muslim or a believer has been so much promoted that it has become manifest in all parts of live. However, this commercialization and
capitalization of Islamization is not a reason to ignore it. Afterwards the plenary discussion took up even more questions corresponding to the numerous issues that have been elaborated in Derichs’s book.

The Book


Hardback: 9781138188747 / eBook: 9781315642123

See also: https://www.gcr21.org/en/publications/routledge-series/