Conference Report

World Society in the Making?
Varieties of Transnational Institutions

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Workshop hosted by:
Käte Hamburger Kolleg /
Centre for Global Cooperation Research
(KHK/GCR21)
The conference ‘World Society in the Making? Varieties of Transnational Institutions’ aimed to identify potential patterns of transnational cooperation and to take a fresh look at processes of institutional diffusion. Rainer Baumann, Katja Freistein – both heads of Research Units at the Centre – and Andrew Cooper – a former Centre’s fellow and Professor at the University of Waterloo, London – conceptualized the conference which was held from 7th to 8th of December at the Mercator hall of the University of Duisburg-Essen. Scholars on seven panels engaged with the possibilities of an emerging world society from various perspectives ranging from practice theory applied to International Relations to quantitative econometric pieces. Thereby, the lively discussions between the internationally assembled participants from various disciplinary backgrounds were generally perceived as a highlight of the conference. Thus, the conference was both in content and in practice an interdisciplinary and internationally cooperative endeavour, in accordance with the core mission of the Centre.

Initial research questions and introductory remarks

The conference embraced conceptual and theoretical contributions that addressed the question of cooperation in a possible world society, empirical analyses of instances and forms of international, transnational as well as regional cooperation. The conference saw contributions which elaborated on patterns of institutionalization of these forms of cooperation. In her initial remarks to the conference, Katja Freistein hinted at the potential of world society theories to conceptualize macro determination on the global level. She introduced that the emergence of a world society is often considered to be a homogenizing process dominated by the extension of Western rationality. Similarly, norm diffusion is mostly portrayed as a top-down process of transferring globally accepted norms to ‘local’ settings, e.g. through localisation or emulation. In line with such theoretical development, she put forward the following research questions: Is this what we truly observe when we look at the various forms of (institutionalized) transnational cooperation? Can we not expect that the at least partial demise of the West and the rise of new powers, regions and new types of actors have led to the growing cultural and thus also institutional differentiation in the world? And do these different instances of cooperation follow the same assumed rationalities – or do they offer alternative forms and functions of cooperation?
1st Panel: State Communities in Historical and Current Perspectives

The first panel introduced a theoretical take on the ethical dimension of state interactions and on historical instances of norm conflict and emergence. Sasikumar S. Sundaram elaborated on the concept of Deontic Scorekeeping as a new take on norms in state interactions. Following Robert Brandom, international norms could be conceptualized as being assembled out of score keeping and score taking practices. His contribution related this approach to a case study on the India Bangladeshi war in the 1970s highlighting the practical dimension of normative statements applied. Zach Sell presented a historian’s account on a specific instance of US abolitionism: He elaborated how abolitionist norms advised free market work in India in order to promote the surplus of non-slavery work. Presenting instances of such a normative influx on India, he gave an enlightening example of transnational norm development and its influence on transnational cooperation.

2nd Panel: Regional Institutionalization and the Evolution of Transnational Governance

The second panel considered regions as focal points of norm diffusion and transnational cooperation. Andrew Cooper and Richard Stubbs elaborated on the ‘thickening’ regional institutions in the Americas and Asia-Pacific. They portrayed the development of ‘hub’ and challenging institutions as two interacting types of institutionalization. Anton Malkin presented on the New Silk Road Initiative as a possible new type of south-south cooperation which might spread a different, non-western set of regional norms. Thereby, the analysis of politicians’ speeches revealed the Chinese led nature of these institutional developments. Laura Allison put forward a new perspective on ASEAN norms: She approached ASEAN as a norm entrepreneur, intending to diffuse ASEAN norms such as sovereignty, non-interference, and consensus. She showed how ASEAN uses different techniques of norm diffusion in order to create a regional community among its members. Richard Higgott presented an alternative framing of world society as the emergence of regional worlds and regionalized world orders. In doing so, he intended to show that different bottom-up processes of norm diffusion imply the set-up of inherently different non-western world orders.
3rd Panel: Formal Institutions and World Society

Katharina McIarren put forward theoretical perspectives on religious actors which by now had not been appropriately considered in IR. Thereby, her presentation especially focused on hybrid actors which embody partly religious and partly state characteristics such as the Vatican and Iran. Helene Binder gave a presentation on possible determinants in a G-Zero world from a trade policy perspectives. Revealing insights from game-theoretical evolutionary modelling, she argued that it is likely that trade cooperation occurs in a G-zero world as well. Andrew Baker shed light on the Jackson Hole event, which gathers central bankers, academics and private sector entrepreneurs to discuss questions of finance regulation. He shared results from a first empirical study which revealed patterns of knowledge dissemination and legitimation at Jackson Hole from the early nineties to the end of the 2000s.

4th Panel: Courts and Transnational Experts: Towards Global Law?

Andrea Birdsall shared a project which theorizes the International Criminal Court as a possible global constitutional court. Outlining diverse theoretical criteria for a constitutional court, her analysis revealed that the International Criminal Court might be in its impartial function an important instance in advancing global justice. Filipe dos Reis elaborated on how international law works when it comes to international violence. Considering latest work on the ‘dark side’ of law and legality in IR, he developed the argument that the discussion about a ‘responsibility to protect’ shifted the focus from a backward oriented (normative) logic of international law to a future oriented logic (temporal uncertainty) to provide effective protection to populations at risk. Timo Walter challenged the often applied strategy to solve the (conceptual) challenges of governing globalization by extending the vocabulary of state power and public authority to the emergent global / transnational ‘levels’. In his thought-provoking presentation he argued that conceptual innovation and reconfiguration remain very much structured by the problématique of the state.

5th Panel: Civil Society: Historical Legacies and Current Developments

Thomas Davies challenged the notion that Non-Governmental Organisations were a mainly western phaenomenon of the last decades. He gave a historian’s account of the various non-Western sources of NGOs tracing back to the 18th century. Angela Last mapped out parallel institutions as a theoretical concept to
fill gaps in current theories of global institutionalizations. Parallel institutions were conceptualized as alternative institutions in contrast to the liberal dominated current official institutions. Akin Iwilade presented on the transnational politics of violent youth movements in Nigeria’s Oil Delta. Thereby, he focused on interactions between local democratic struggles, the environmental movement and transnational civil organizations. Saban Taniyici and Gokhan Bozbas elaborated on the influence of the Syrian refugee crisis and its uptake by Turkish Civil Society. They stressed the high efforts and importance of religious groups within Turkey.

6th Panel: Which Global Society? Emerging Coalitions

Alexandra Kaasch analysed whether the Ebola crisis led to a shift towards health systems strengthening in global health governance. Thereby, her results were rather discouraging, portraying only a limited re-focus on health systems strengthening due to the Ebola Crisis. Thomas Burri shared his conceptual take on state like-mindedness, especially regarding community of democracies. He elaborated in how far ‘like-mindedness’ might be a useful category for future research.

7th Panel: Trajectories of Inter- and Transnational Governance: Confronting Crime and Illicit Actors

Noemi Gal-Or presented on the indirect demand aspect of corruption in world metropolitan centres. Thereby, she showcased the effect indirect corruption has on housing markets in metropolitan centres and mapped out the need and potential for transnational cooperation in response. Sigrid Quack explored monopolistic and pluralistic trajectories of transnational governance, focussing on the role of expert knowledge. She stressed the disputed, multifaceted and politicised nature of claims of expertise. Anja P. Jacobi’s presentation outlined variations in global crime governance arrangements and explained this variation referring to political determination. This led to insightful explanations of diverging governance arrangements.
Concluding Remarks and Outlook

In his concluding remarks Rainer Baumann highlighted the exemplary nature of the conference in moving social sciences towards an interdisciplinary and truly global endeavour. Thereby, he highlighted that world society theories showcased their ability to challenge academia to consider new conceptual takes on global processes of institutionalisation. On the other hand, he emphasized that the conference was marked by a refusal of macro determining theories of the world society. He concluded that while utilizing world society theories might be a promising endeavour, conceptual work is still in a challenging but as well promising stage of emergence.

Report written by Luis Aue and Nadja Krupke