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SPECIAL ISSUE

Introduction

Area Studies *cum* Disciplines: Asia and Europe from a Transdisciplinary Perspective

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Seeking common ground: the notion of "unwritten rules"

This special issue or Themenheft of ASIEN addresses the burgeoning relationship between area studies and different academic disciplines. Most of the articles that are included were first presented as papers in an international workshop held at Marburg University, Germany, in January 2013. The other contributions have been included to add to the issue's overall thematic coherence. The initial motive for convening the workshop emerged from a research cluster on the topic of "unwritten rules" in the modes of political operation in Asia and Europe. The main purpose of this workshop was to discuss and reflect upon the conceptualization of such unwritten rules — or "unwritten constitutions" as a particular form of such rules — in political processes and political (inter)actions.

This endeavor was meant to help formulate and then employ in future a concept that could equally match the concerns of both disciplinary and areas studies approaches regarding the analysis of politics. Hence, of major concern was the question of how this concept might be fleshed out and possibly operationalized. Moreover, the goal herein was to enhance the transdisciplinary debate, understood as going beyond disciplinary approaches so as to seek an effective and synergetic merger with area studies ones too. The notion of unwritten rules/unwritten constitutions in this context focuses on the processes or developments that endanger or undermine the political orders of nation-states in Asia and Europe. Processes of erosion or deformation of democracies, as well as tendencies leading toward a stabilization or restabilization of authoritarian regimes, are interpreted with regard to unwritten rules in, for example, political cultures.

These unwritten rules, we argue, influence and shape the political choices and actions of both individual and collective actors. Unwritten rules can be linked to and/or lead to a pluralization of legal orders, as well as to the growing importance of

ethnicity, religion, gender regimes, and the like — phenomena that can thus be perceived as the consequences of nonformal orders gaining momentum in the formal (political) order. The disciplinary approach taken in this special issue is informed specifically by the theoretical and methodological tools of political science. In terms of geographical areas for empirical reflection, Asia and Europe serve as the regions of choice.

These two regions have been chosen for comparison here since their relationship has a long and stable history, and given that they are two highly relevant regions in the current international economic and political arenas. Moreover while both regions have been referred to as "Asia" and "Europe" respectively, what exactly renders them a "region," how they became "regionalized," and what (geographical) areas and states they are actually comprised of all remain contested questions. Our understanding of Europe *and* Asia as one suitable unit of analysis was based initially on the findings of global history studies (primarily informed by the idea of "entangled modernities," Conrad and Randeria 2002) and on the scholarly work that has been done on transcultural flows between the two regions.[1]

Theory-based approaches

In International Relations (IR), the notion of "soft power" has been established as a way to describe sources of mutual influence beyond such "hard" instruments of power exertion as military and economic might. Cultural goods and consumer products are often subsumed under the soft power label, and can take the form of a "McDonalds-ization" — in reference to the appreciation elsewhere in the world of fast food from the United States — as well as a "Manga-ization" — in the case of the global spread of a special type of comic from Japan — to name but a couple of possible examples of this. In comparative politics the more subtle, nonformal ways of channeling the appreciation of certain ideas or institutions are considered to constitute "informal politics." They can be entrenched in any formal political setting — such as parliament, elections, the bureaucracy, and so on — and become relevant on both the input and output levels of the political process.

Asian politics has at times been portrayed as a cradle of informal interaction, with examples stretching from the employment of *guanxi* in China[2] to patronage relations in Pakistan, from dynastic networks in the Philippines to *nemawashi* procedures in

1 In Germany, this work has emerged predominantly out of the Excellence Cluster on "Asia and Europe in the Global Context: The Dynamics of Transculturality" at the University of Heidelberg. See: http://www.asia-europe.uni-heidelberg.de/en/research/b-public-spheres/overview/what-are-the-key-terms-we-use-and-what-do-we-mean-by-them/transculturality.html (accessed June 19, 2014).

2 *Guanxi* refers to interpersonal relationships that facilitate networking and collaboration. While a precise translation of the word is difficult, guanxi is oftentimes simply referred to in English as "connections."

Japan[3] — to, again, name but a few representative manifestations thereof (Lowell et al. 2000). Taking the entanglement of both regions as a vantage point, we repudiate the conventional view of Asia and Europe as regions with exclusively different and specific political features. Rather than subscribing to this perception, we intend to carve out what the similarities between the two regions are — doing which allows for a solid analysis of what makes political order work (or fail) beyond the realm of formal institutions, rules, and norms.

In the field of sociological institutionalism, cognitive patterns rather than informal (as opposed to formal) procedures are designated the relevant factors that shape individual and collective attitudes toward, for instance, social and political institutions. According to this line of thought, institutions create norms that effect behavior through cognitive scripts rather than through material resources. Individuals follow institutional rules because they are considered socially appropriate (as compared to instrumentally advantageous). A more recent approach, one that has been inspired by a number of different disciplines and is thus a transdisciplinary approach of its own, is the "boundary concept" of "social order" (Mielke et al. 2011). Katja Mielke introduces this approach further in her contribution to this special issue.

The notion of unwritten rules both incorporates and complements the abovementioned approaches. It applies them particularly to a conceptualization of the rules that determine individual and collective political action (or inaction, for that matter). It is an overarching notion that allows for theoretical reflection, as well as for empirical case studies in both Asia and Europe. In the contributions to this ASIEN special issue, the various authors each take a different path toward describing and conceptualizing the "unwritten" mechanisms of norm compliance. As such, the individual articles complement each other in a number of ways; we briefly outline some of the interconnections between them below.

The different articles and their interconnections

Ursula Birsl and Samuel Salzborn present a first attempt to reflect on unwritten rules by focusing on the concept of "unwritten constitutions," as a theoretical paradigm for comparative area studies. A crucial point is made by both in their demand for the integration of Europe — or the regions of "the West" in more general terms — as a region of equal comparative stature into the research design — rather than implicitly treating Europe/the West as the platform from which comparison is conducted. Their suggestion is to look for paths and patterns of political-cultural developments in various different regions so as to detect any similarities and differences between

3 *Nemawashi* means smart negotiation and decisions made in small circles behind the scenes, usually happening well before a "public" decision takes place. The literal translation of the word is "to dig out the earth around a plant"; this metaphor also signifies giving proper care and attention to established contacts.

them, thus departing from the convention of attempting to scale the democratic achievements or setbacks of countries or regions in the formal political arena. Their approach is first and foremost theoretical in nature, although it invites scholars of and from Europe and Asia to reflect on potential future ways to operationalize the idea and conduct cross-regional comparative research.

Claudia Derichs then tries to link up Birsl's and Salzborn's theory-based reflections with the current discussions of area studies/comparative area studies — including Katja Mielke's reflections on area-specific society studies, which also follow suit. Derichs' guiding question is what it means to designate an area as an epistemological unit, and how this has shaped the art of knowledge production in European/Western (comparative) area studies. She then presents the different research designs that can be employed with regard to the comparison of unwritten constitutions — in other words research designs that derive from taking a strongly disciplinary perspective on the one hand and a critical area studies one on the other.

The power of shared understandings achieved via uncodified yet commonly internalized norms has been conceptualized elsewhere by Mielke, Schetter, and Wilde (2011) as the "social order" — something that continues to function even if the state, as the accepted authority that exercises and executes normative orders, is absent. This is an approach that attempts to systematize and include the cognitive realm into the strands of institutional theory, and that at the same time borrows concepts from several different disciplines. Moreover, social order serves as a "mid-range concept" for the social sciences, which enables interdisciplinary communication through its boundary capacity. The concept is conceived of as the interplay of the social practices and cognitive scripts that provide guidelines for appropriate forms of daily interaction and collective behavior. Mielke introduces this approach from a theoretical and an empirical perspective. Her empirical examples draw from two projects, in rural Afghanistan and urban Pakistan respectively. While the analytical concept was initially developed by scrutinizing empirical findings at the local level in Central Asian border regions, it indeed has the potential to be extended and be utilized to study Western societies, as Mielke puts it, "from below."

Another example of the application of a theoretical notion to an empirical case is offered in Heike Holbig's article on China's unwritten constitution. Holbig's reflections are presented in the form of the critical discussion of a paper that was authored by Jiang Shigong, and which is representative of an increasing intellectual current among those scholars in the People's Republic who reject a "liberal" reading of the Chinese constitution and prefer instead to point out the importance of China's unwritten one. Holbig assumes a critical stance toward this innovation, and hints at the danger of a gradual crowding out of liberal voices. This potential development notwithstanding, the fact that "unwritten constitution" has even become a term of

reference in Chinese academic discourse is a remarkable development — moreover one that shows that the study of unwritten rules and unwritten constitutions is indeed an emerging research field.

An understanding of unwritten rules and unwritten constitutions is best achieved by way of some empirical examples. Since the basic task of research on unwritten rules is to find any significant similarities of patterns in politics above and beyond whatever formal rules and institutions have already been implemented, the comparison of Asia and Europe is extremely pertinent. Andrea Fleschenberg and Claudia Wiesner illustrate this in their study of political parties in exemplary country cases from both Asia and Europe. While classical accounts might stress the differences in the party systems in these two regions, as well as within regimes in different stages of democratic transition, Fleschenberg and Wiesner concentrate instead on the similarities of political parties and the structure of party systems. They thereby discover some telling resemblances — which exist even despite the persistent differences — between Asian and European countries.

Unwritten rules are discernible in daily human interaction. They reveal the contradiction between formally established and publicly well accepted and internalized democratic values, procedures, and institutions on the one hand, and the simultaneous compliance with utterly undemocratic practices on the other. Maznah Mohamad addresses this seeming contradiction between formally versus factually valid norms of behavior. Her article focuses specifically on nonstate religious women in the public space, presenting a case study from Malaysia. Maznah analyzes the example of a feminized public sphere, the existence of which has enabled the institution of religion to generate opposing postures of empowerment. This has led to more similarities than differences between Malaysian women's organizations, and to their greater striving for agency. In contrast to the state, the nonstate public sphere has no formal legalistic means available to it by which to render certain rules legitimate. Yet, as Maznah writes, "while the state constructs its own notion of the authentic Islamic woman or family (with all the ambivalences contained therein) the nonstate sector also provides its own version of the female subject." The subtle power of unwritten norms, rules, and perceptions, which are manifested in markers of identity and authenticity rooted in religion, carries considerable significance for the respective societal and social orders. Maznah's study concentrates on the case of Malaysia, but she emphasizes that her findings are likewise applicable to many other Muslim societies besides (and beyond Asia).

The thematic section of this special issue concludes with a third empirical study, one that is different in kind to the others since its scope is global and not specifically aimed at Asia or Europe. Cindy Daase presents herein some preliminary reflections on global public cities in the 21st century from the combined perspective of international law and political science. Cities interact as if they were states, Daase reasons, including in the use of the language of international law. While they operate

parallel to and beyond nation-states, cities become laboratories for various projects — both democratic and nondemocratic — and can therefore not be neglected as actors in domestic and international politics. They operate on the basis of both written and unwritten rules in their relationship with the state and with other cities. Daase's reflections hint at the possibility of a transdisciplinary dialogue, one that could inspire the exchanging of cross-area perspectives on the 21st century global public city. Imagining cities as sites of dense political contestation, Daase's thoughts invite the reader to relate them to Holbig's article and ask if Chinese cities such as Beijing or Shanghai might in future become laboratories for the contestation of "liberal" or "nonliberal" readings of the Chinese constitution.

Outlook

The contributions to this special issue of ASIEN seem disparate in nature at first glance. However, all of the articles address the meanings, mechanisms, and effects of unwritten rules and unwritten constitutions in European and Asian contexts — be it in a cross-area, intra-area, theory-based, conceptual, or empirical regard. Some stick to using the state as the core frame of reference for analysis, while others point out the shortcomings of drawing on container categories such as this one. Taken as a coherent whole, the articles of this issue show how different disciplinary- and area studies-informed approaches still are — in spite of their being in agreement on the conceptual usefulness of unwritten rules/unwritten constitutions in various regional contexts. We do not want to play down these disparities for the time being, since the contributions serve as a snapshot of a debate that is currently still ongoing over the questions of how, why, and to what end disciplines and area studies approaches should find a relationship with each other that everybody can approve of as a "healthy" one. In this regard, the articles of this issue reflect an attempt to "come together" at a particular point in time — namely the current moment wherein the (alleged) hegemony of knowledge production in the Global North is now being critically questioned and put into perspective.

For the previously mentioned research cluster on unwritten rules, the conceptualization of these is still at a nascent stage. We nonetheless believe in its key significance, and conceive of the approach as one major element in the epistemic endeavor of diversifying "area knowledge" and decentering the perspective on "political order" by looking out from various different disciplines.[4] On balance, political order is a phenomenon ultimately contingent on the interplay of both actors and institutions alike (Mayntz and Scharpf 1995).[5] However beyond actor-centered institutionalism, sociological institutionalism, political culture approaches, and explanatory models of norm diffusion and regime legitimacy, fresh

4 The call to diversify and decenter area studies was first articulated by Goh Beng-Lan (2011), with respect particularly to the study of Southeast Asia.

5 This approach has become known as "actor-centered institutionalism."

insights are now needed from anthropology, law, religious studies, social geography, psychology, global history, and more disciplines besides so as to understand the complexities of empirical reality. In this sense, our approach could well be termed "postdisciplinary"; this is a notion that the various authors contributing to this ASIEN special issue have also themselves more or less subscribed to in their respective articles.

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