Researching Africa south of the Sahara: a sociologist's perspective

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A sociologist's perspective[1]

Abstract

This paper presents key concepts for sociological research in Africa considered important for a wider sociological debate. For the integration of our already given knowledge based on case studies we need a comparative approach. This offers the chance to overcome the trap between simplifying generalizations on Africa as a whole and the restriction of the analysis of stand-alone case studies. Two fields of research are proposed to implement the comparative approach. First, the African state shall be understood as a societal institution that is constituted in every day life. Second, sociology shall develop useful categories to describe social differentiation in African societies. African studies still use outdated concepts of class and strata and ignores the conceptual development in sociology. 'Uncertainty' and 'reflexive modernity' may work as a kind of conceptual umbrella to link research on Africa with the theoretical sociological debate.

Keywords

Africa south of the Sahara, African studies, sociology, comparative science, state of research, subjects of research, theory, theory of the state, social differentiation

Introduction

End of June 2005 the first European Conference of African Studies took place in London, organized by the Africa European Group of Interdisciplinary Studies (AEGIS). This important step for the development of a European platform of African Studies offered an inventory of current research on Africa in Europe. The concept of an open call for panels without an overall theme or specific conceptual frame gave access to all research interests in Europe today. Therefore, the conference brochure, listing a hundred panels

and abstracts of about four hundred papers, presents a kind of mirror image of the range of African studies in Europe.[2]

The diversity of themes, issues, disciplines and concepts underlines that African studies are inter-disciplinary as reflected also by many panels. These were mainly composed of political sciences, anthropology, history, and fine arts. Other disciplines were less represented, especially economics and sociology, with linguistics missing completely.

Whereas the linguistics represent a special case[3] the poor representation of economics and sociology needs a closer look. In the case of economy the disinterest corresponds with the fading importance of Africa for the world economy in general. Africa is and seems to be in the nearer future de-linked from the main economic dynamics. Additionally, the main economic strategies seem to have failed in Africa. The analysis of economic failure seem to be much less interesting for economists than state failure for political scientists.

For sociology one may draw a similar picture. Sociology in general has no interest in Africa at all. Comparative research focuses mainly on industrialized countries whereas Africa is mostly not even mentioned. The sociology of development has lost much of its importance. The few sociologists who still work on Africa mainly concentrate on micro-sociological studies overlapping with anthropology in research themes and methods or are interested in an analysis of the development apparatus. Theory-led sociological studies are easier detectable in the analysis of Middle- and Eastern European transformation countries than in African studies. After the failing of the 'grand theories' and the following empirical turn (Neubert 2003) it seems that developmental sociology has not found new themes that may attract sociological research outside the existing small community. This begs the question whether there are no more promising research issues. I want to make the point that there are challenges in African studies that are at the same time important for sociology in general, since they will contribute to the development of sociological concepts and theories. The following arguments do not claim to be comprehensive, rather present some themes, concepts and basic methodological principles considered to be promising.

An understanding of processes of change requires a comparative component. To say anything intelligent about 'change' or 'development' needs more than one case. Therefore, the first thing to stress is the importance of a comparative approach. Put simply, a comparative approach does not mean

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2 The conference website gives some basic statistic data with 780 people attending the conference of which were 66 directly from Africa (Africans working or studying in Europe were counted under the host countries) and another sixty were from America. Therefore about 650 participants were from Europe. http://www.nomadit.co.uk/~aegis/index.htm.

3 They have already well-established fora on the European level and have no need for another conference.

that one should look at Africa in relation to Europe or North America. What we are concerned about is whether things differ, and if they do, how. Successful comparative research requires differentiated key concepts to describe and analyse key elements of whatever we are looking at. We need basic research to develop already existing key concepts further. There are two research issues that should be revisited with new questions and approaches: the state and the society in Africa.

State and society allow us to understand processes of change in Africa. For a comparative approach the concepts of 'uncertainty' and 'reflexive modernity' could serve as means to integrate our empirical results. They help us to introduce research results from Africa into a general sociological debate as well as into the political debate on the future of the welfare state. This documents that social research on Africa is not something exotic, which some weird specialists do. Rather, it is an integrated and important part of social science in general.

The need for a comparative approach

Every study that leads to statements on 'Africa' or 'Sub-Saharan Africa' invites criticism. Books on 'urbanisation in Africa', or 'the state in Africa' suggest that we can talk about Africa in general. While there might be some plausible generalizations, nearly every statement on Africa can be countered by another to the effect that in this or that case the situation is completely different. On the other hand case studies are criticized for not allowing generalisations and, therefore, for not lending themselves to inclusion in a general theoretical debate. When we look at the social sciences, especially at sociology and anthropology, we find numerous case studies that pursued the debates on 'big theories' (modernization and dependency). But we did not use the empirical results efficiently. Instead, we need differentiated statements on this or that 'type' of state, economy, society, or political system. The only way to create and use such meaningful typologies is by way of empirical comparative studies.

Most studies on Africa or other countries of the South are produced and read against the background of the industrialized countries. The problem is the missing transparency of what is being compared. In many cases the industrialized countries are represented by an idealized image of themselves. It is surprising how little many Africanists know about poverty, change, political structures in the industrialized countries and the differences among these. We rarely find studies that pursue the same research questions in Africa and in an industrialized country. This non-transparent comparison between African reality and idealized North will always be biased against Africa.

The idea of comparative studies is not new at all. Yet, we must see the short-comings of mainstream comparative approaches. Studies by the World Bank, the OECD, the ILO use the weak statistical data form national statistics. These are limited to macroeconomics, demography or infrastructure. The analytical value for social science projects based exclusively on this type of data is limited.

Another type of comparative studies in political sciences uses overall indicators and focus on democratisation, human rights or corruption. Typical databases like freedom house index or the corruption index of Transparency International are much too general and do not necessarily produce reliable data. Nearly every country specialist can mention a list of problematic or even misleading judgements. All these wide ranging comparative databases need a small number of simple indicators. But simplicity is often formalistic and risks ignoring new developments, particularities and surprising facts. Information is pressed into a pre-cast frame of mainstream generalizations.

Usually neither economic statistical nor indicator based studies contextualise facts. These kinds of comparative studies face two systematic problems: They lack a sound base of rich an meaningful empirical data and they use mainstream concepts analysis. More data of the same kind will not be sufficient for innovative research. We still rarely find systematic comparative case studies. One is the 'Afrobarometer' based on quantitative studies on political attitudes in currently over twenty African countries with a sound methodological standard. There is a similarly constructed 'Eurobarometer'. But the contextualisation is missing and they follow mainstream concepts of democracy. Another promising instrument is a catalogue of criteria for conflict assessment at country level developed for the German Ministry of Economic Cooperation (Spelten 2000). Country specialists do the assessment using a generalized list of questions and indicators, and may add comments. But this instrument is not yet used for research purposes.

We need comparative approaches based on case studies with sound knowledge of the countries studied and focussed empirical research. Usually comparative studies in sociology are limited to two or three countries. To widen this perspective we need new analytical frameworks for comparative analysis that are theoretically sound and adapted to the conditions of specific cases, and based on excellent knowledge of cases researched. This limits the number of cases. For a larger number of cases we ought to make compromises. One way is the secondary analyses of existing case studies, a possibility rarely used. One reason might be that we lack categories to bring the case studies together.

In a sociological perspective typologies – in the Weberian sense of 'ideal types' – provide a promising way of organizing case studies. This could help in developing criteria for differentiating clear-cut types and indicators for ex-

clusion of cases from this or that type. At the same time, we can describe our cases in terms of their unique features in relation to the ideal type criteria. There are starting points like the 'Afrika-Memorandum' (Engel et al. 2000), where a rough typology of African countries is presented, which needs to be further elaborated. Another example is the worldwide 16 country comparative study on good governance (Hyden et al. 2003), where empirical data are combined with the systematic analyses by country experts. But countries are just one, however important, entity for comparison; we also need to look at segments of a society, groups or institutions. And in all these cases we need an overall framework that brings together our comparative categories and the need for contextualisation. Such projects can only be mastered by working groups or research networks. The typical PhD. study or post-doc project will be much too limited for such an enterprise.

For the target of systematic differentiation of statements on 'Africa' we need at first and basically *comparative studies inside Africa*. One result of the comparative approach could be a conceptual framework for systematic comparative studies. Therefore, we have to experiment with categories and factors for the selection of countries to compare:

• We still should compare countries with a different colonial past across the Anglophone, Francophone and Lusophone divide.

• We should include 'successful' and 'less successful' in the meaning of economic and political development into our samples. 'Successful' should be understood as a heuristic concept for perceived economic and political stability and improved living conditions. Surprisingly, the somewhat exceptional cases of so-called 'successful countries' like Botswana and especially Mauritius do not seem to have attracted the interest of social scientists up to now.

The comparative approach should include *industrialized countries*. This discloses the in-transparent comparisons and benchmarking. It should bring the Western utopia back to its diverse reality. If we look at political change, political sociology or social policy we find an extreme diversity among these countries.

Especially the *post-communists countries in Southeast Europe and Central Asia* seem to be unstable and uncertain like Africa. We are confronted with informalisation of economy (informal sector, mafia-type structures), weak and failing states, patron-client-relationships in economy and politics, ethnic movements, the challenge of the monopoly of power by separatist movements, warlordism or organized crime. This comparison may show that many problems we see in Africa are not typically 'African' problems, but rather problems of radical change in instability.

Looking on *South-East Asia*, which is often mentioned as a region where successful industrialization is still possible for developing countries (Thailand, Malaysia or currently Vietnam), we may learn something about societal conditions for development. But we have to have in mind that there are countries with massive economic and political problems, too (Burma, Cambodia, Laos).

A comparison with *West Asia - North Africa (WANA)* may build a bridge to include the whole of Africa. Comparative cases are interesting because quite a few countries had rather good starting positions (resources like oil, acceptable education systems) but did not use the chances at hand (Algeria, Egypt, Syria, Iraq).

When we take this concept seriously, African sociological studies could foster the contact to other Area studies, which we need as a prerequisite for comparative studies that are based on contextualised analysis and interpretation of data.

African states at work and the problem of order

The African post-colonial state is a well-established area of research and the mainstream questions of political sciences like political regimes, patrimonialism, democratisation and elections have been thoroughly analysed.

But this research shows at least two weaknesses: Firstly, many studies are based on a conception of the state, which is oriented at Western liberal democracies under the rule of law. This concept is normatively loaded and may lead us to miss neutral categories for comparative description. Secondly, there is a bias on 'big' policy and politics: who rules, who gains the power? These studies do not provide information on the role of the state or policy in every day life. To overcome these limitations we should tackle state building and new forms of order and state in every day life as related fields of research.

State building and new forms of order in Africa

As long as we base our studies on the concept of a state with Western liberal democracy under the rule of law we risk mixing a development goal with an analytical category. From a research point of view it is a legitimate question whether this or that country is democratic or not, or which factors support or constrain the development of a special type of regime. However, if we want to understand social and political dynamics our research should be much more open for different developments and dynamics. The concept of 'failed states' may have a normative bias as well but it underlines processes that do not move in the direction of democracy. It shows that states cannot be taken for granted.

The territorial state is quite a new institution that developed during modernity and was brought to Africa by colonialism. We have to recognize that state building is a global process with a-synchronicities between the outside and the inside of states. Seen from the outside African states are part of international politics in which the world is made up of territorial states. African states are juridical states (Jackson & Rosberg 1983) created as a result of the universal statehood (Clapham 2003). Seen from inside this homogenous picture changes radically. Especially, but not only, in Africa states still struggle to assert their internationally accepted sovereignty inside their own territory. What on the face of it looks like a continent of nation-states carries a big number of different forms of the organisation of territorial political and military power. There are powerful local militias and rebel groups fighting successfully against the central government and we find arrangements between local power holders and a central government that give local leaders nearly all elements of state power as a form of 'para-sovereignty (Klute & v. Trotha 2001). 'State' is at first only the externally attributed concept for an internationally accepted territorial entity.

If we want to understand political and social developments in Africa we must at first describe how these political entities are really structured and how they work. In order to describe these entities we have to go back to the basics of a state. These are the 'monopoly of violence' with defined borders, the existence of administration and structures of government. The question is in fact simple: is there a government and where does it really rule? What we need next are categories and typologies for a comparative description. We have to come to terms with structures that do not match the classical definition of state. A point of departure for further research might be Bayart (1993) or Geertz (1980).

Beyond the question of the state we are confronted with the political and social order. The territorial state is just one (historically very successful) model. The current debate about new global regimes and the devaluation of the territorial state through the growing importance of supra-national structures at one end and the cross-border organization political movements and political organizations inside an international civil society at the other end does not catch the developments in Africa. The globalisation debate looks at the dynamics in and between existing and functioning territorial states in industrialized countries. The precarious situation of African states is simply not seen.

I am not sure whether Africa presents a de facto model for the future, with an ongoing privatisation of basic state function, like the monopoly of violence, as v. Trotha (2000) points out provocatively. But we have to admit that the model of the territorial state is just one among others. It is not sufficient to list the deficits of the existing African states against the 'proper terri-

torial state' but requires categories to describe the existing ways of creating political orders, even when those may be weak and unstable.

State in every day life

The bias on 'big' politics stands for a narrow concept of the state (and politics). The question who rules in what kind of system is important but not sufficient, especially in a situation where the state is still struggling to gain internal sovereignty. We should press for a wider sociological perspective in which the state and the polity as a whole shall be understood as a societal institution that is constituted in every day life. Former experiences with the state (and its institutions), expectations towards and images of the state shape its performance. These institutions are neither pre-cast nor act independent from the social context. Processes of interaction between the state (and it's institutions) and the people matter. 'The state' has to be seen as an open heuristic category for a political system of order that fills in its own way the shell produced by the juridical statehood.

Studies should focus on the production of statehood (*Staatlichkeit*) in every day life via the expectations of people, their agency and those of the representatives of the state, which constitute the reality of statehood. This analysis includes people's notion of the state, of its tasks and functions, rules, demands and decisions. Does the state stand for security with a monopoly of violence, rule of law, social security? Does it provide infrastructure? Or is the state seen as a threat, stealing money, interfering in a well-organized local life and setting unacceptable rules and regulations? What are the embodiments of the state? Are they health centre, schools, streets, the police station? We should also look into the interaction of people with the institutions of the state and its agents. And we have to include the perspective of the representatives of the state at different levels, too. Phenomena like clientelism, nepotism, corruption as well as elections and the implementation of laws have to be reinterpreted from a perspective that stresses agency. This offers a micro and mezo-perspective on political practice and allows us to understand the state from different points in society, like big entrepreneurs, a pastoralist in a remote area, taxi driver, intellectual journalist as well as high ranking government official, leading politician or government officer at local level.

The work of the group around Olivier de Sardan, Thomas Bierschenk, Carola Lentz and Tidjani Alou on local level politics and the embodiment of the state on the local level moves in this direction (Bierschenk 2003, Blundo & Olivier de Sardan 2001). We also observe the demand for more studies on political parties in Africa (Mehler 2003). However, these studies are still few and the linkage with a comparative analysis of the state is yet to be developed. It is important to go beyond an emic perspective towards a state. The crucial point

for an understanding of the state and the polity as a societal institution is the interaction between people and the state and the specific form of political order that is produced by this interaction.

Both research themes, forms of territorial political power and political order and state in every day life, are part and parcel of the proposed comparative approach. If we want to understand the role of the state in development we need differentiated categories of types of states in the sense of their sovereignty inside and the perceived reality of the state by its people. This helps also to draw a more realistic picture of states and government instead of the idealized conception of 'good governance'. The focus on the diversity of territorial political order gives us access to a less normative view of states. In Africa exist alternative types of territorial political organization. Even if we dislike these new forms, they may gain more importance in the coming years beside the Western type territorial state. This growing importance of alternative types of political order shall not be confused with a simple relativistic position of 'anything goes'. Once a specific type of political order is identified we must ask for its strengths and weaknesses.

Bringing society back in

During the debate on post-socialist transformation Grancelli (1995: 31) criticized the dominance of economic analysis with the slogan 'bringing society back in'. A look at African studies suggests that this warning does not seem necessary. The development debate has since the 1980s been also about the importance of socio-cultural factors. But socio-cultural factors are often only a kind of residual category for those influences we do not understand and cannot control. Additionally, civil society is a key term of current social science debates on Africa. The concept has been criticized for its vagueness, and there have been many attempts to define it. But the definition is not the problem. It doesn't matter which definition is used, all the studies on civil society leave important questions open. These include: Who constitutes the civil society? Who are the members of voluntary associations, of social movements? Who belongs to their constituency? Who is mobilized by civil society groups? Who feels represented by these groups?

Members or followers of civil society groups are usually described in vague terms and categories like professionals, urban middle class, elites or workers. We face this vagueness in describing parts of a society also in development practice. The so-called 'target groups' of development policy are often described by rough terms like 'small farmers', the 'poor', the 'poorest of the poor'. These terms work by imagination of helplessness and draw a picture of a victim without exactly defining their position in society.

The concepts of class or the rural–urban divide do not fill the conceptual gap (Neubert 2005): African societies are hardly structured along these dividing lines; individuals change their position often several times during their biography; identity usually does not follow 'class' divisions; the rural-urban division ignores strong rural-urban ties and the fact that many African families are at the same time rural and urban; many important family networks and patron-client-relationships link people of different 'classes' together.

Whereas in industrial societies the analysis of social structure differentiated during the 1980s and 1990s, the categories used for the description of societies in Africa still date back to the 1960s and 1970s. Some approaches try to describe African societies or segments of societies in an empirically more detailed manner, but they concentrate mostly on small segments of society or highlight just one element. Instead, the analysis of social structure in industrial countries combines socio-economic life circumstances, including entitlement for social security and access to social infrastructure (existential conditions) with the socio-cultural milieu or lifestyle including preferences in consumption, political preferences, identity construction, normative images of a 'good life' and images of one's life plans (existential projections). The result is a two dimensional structure in which people in a similar socio-economic situation might differ clearly in terms of socio-cultural situation and vice-versa. The descriptive categories are not set, but rather the result of empirical analysis.

There are some starting points in development policy where studies try to describe the socio-economic circumstances of target groups. These are on the macro level basic needs profiles of African countries (e.g. Ghai et al. 1979) developed by the ILO in the context of the basic needs strategy, as well as statistical poverty profiles as part of Poverty Reduction Programmes (e.g. Uganda Bureau of Statistics 2001). On the micro level these include participatory research toolbox methods like livelihood analysis or wealth ranking (cf. Uganda Participatory Poverty Assessment Process 2002).

Where as the first two more macro oriented approaches are not detailed enough, the participatory methods still struggle with generalization. For Latin America there is an approach that tries to develop categories with participatory research and combine these with quantitative macro analysis (Ravnborg 1999). The studies conducted for the reduction program in Uganda tried to triangulate the results of more conventional socio-economic household surveys with the results of the participatory poverty assessment (McGee 2004). However, these approaches hardly include entitlements and social security networks and lifestyle/milieu are usually ignored.

Culture and identity have been studied by a great number of mostly ethnographic case studies on dress codes, globalisation of consumption and life styles (Hendrickson 1996). They show us that people in same socio-economic situation and with similar ethnic affiliation may have completely contradict-

ing images of 'good life', as already shown by Mayer (1961) with reference to the Xhosa in East London. Ethnographic case studies remind us that social networks may be extremely extended even up to a global level, especially groups we may call trans-migrants, organizing their life between place like Europe, USA and Africa. But all these studies focus on specific groups using local emic categories of description and do not intend to describe a whole society.

In the 1980s Berg-Schlosser (1984) for Kenya and Schatzberg (1988) for the Congo tried to describe the societies of these countries by a combination of socio-economic position, ethnic identity and the control of or access to resources of the state. Ethnic identity stands for a social cultural element and the resources of the state may be taken as a special entitlement. Most interesting is a study by Eriksen (1998) on Mauritius, where he developed a differentiated structure of ethnic identity and social positions.

Developing a new analytical framework for African societies helps us a) to get an idea about the social basis of civil society, political parties (organisation, membership), electoral constituencies, the motives and the people who participate; b) to know who the dynamic groups are[4], and how they are positioned in the society; c) to understand better who the 'target groups' of development policy are und who responded positively to projects; and d) to describe our statistical universe.

Developing sound analysis of social structure in Africa will contribute to social science in general, which has been developed in industrial countries. We tend to ignore that even the simplest analysis of social structure for most African countries is missing. These studies produce new and assumingly differently structured information that is a challenge to the concepts and categories developed for the special case of industrial countries. In bringing this information into theory production we may go one step further in developing inter-culturally applicable concepts and categories.

'Uncertainty' and 'reflexive modernity' as theoretical concepts

When we take the comparative approach seriously, we need a conceptual framework or at least a common ground where we may integrate our empirical results. Good concepts apply to all societies as analytical categories and have to be developed using a wide range of cases. One can really classify sound social science in terms of what holds true for Europe or North America on the one hand and Africa and other Third World countries on the other. The

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4 The formation of dynamic groups may be researched with the approach of strategic groups (Evers & Schiel 1988, Schubert et al. 1994) that seems currently to be revitalized in a couple of scientific workshops.

'grand theories' like classical modernisation and dependencies theories offered a framework but failed as scientific concepts. We still miss successors to fill this gap. We hardly will find overall theories that can explain development and change worldwide with all its elements (social, political, economical) and present strategies for (development) policy. 'Uncertainty' and 'reflexive modernity' sketch two concepts that may be used to build a bridge between African studies and general sociological debates.

African people and African states are facing risks and disruption and see themselves in a situation of real or potential uncertainty.[5] This sets one main challenge for the future. If we want to see African people and governments in action we always have to consider that they have to cope with risks and search for strategies for managing risks and change. An analysis of this uncertainty is a change in perspective. We do not ask for structure and order that frame agency but we focus on agency under a situation were reliable rules, routines and procedures are missing. This may offer the freedom to develop new type of solutions, new chances and new options. Therefore, uncertainty asks how people act and organize themselves and focuses on the societal management of stress and change.

For sociological research uncertainty links the study of African societies under stress to the debate on the risk society in the industrial countries (Beck 1987). According to the risk sociology, the mastering of dangers by transforming them into calculated risk is a necessity and an achievement of modern (Western) societies. We find the same notion in African societies when people cope with uncertainty (Macamo 2003). This concept of uncertainty offers the chance to bring currently widely debated phenomena in industrial and developing societies together under a common theoretical umbrella, such as social security, conflict, violence, terrorism, failing states with uncertainty of laws and regulations and their enforcement.

This concept of uncertainty shall not be confused with vulnerability (Krüger & Macamo 2003). Vulnerability focuses on weak and marginal groups and underlines their problems of mere survival. It describes a situation where people try defending themselves and try to survive. Uncertainty, in contrast, may offer the freedom for change and the chance for agency.

Whereas uncertainty derives from an analysis of the situation in Africa, reflexive modernity is directly linked to the current sociological debate. In the sociology of the industrial countries the analysis of modernity is still one of the key concepts.[6] It may fulfill the function as a bridge between sociology in

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5 The focus on uncertainty has been developed in a series of discussions with colleagues in Bayreuth.

6 The current theories on modernity have gone far beyond deterministic simplifications of a modernization theory (Rostow 1960).

general and studies on Africa. Modernity has already been recovered for African studies by some anthropologists (Geschiere 1997) even when their concept seems to be vague.

In the current sociological debate about modernity, Africa can be a challenging empirical field. We see an asynchronous change in several elements. On the one hand Africa tries to catch up with industrial countries in terms of economic, institutional and political development; and the modern industrialized countries still stand for the promises of modernity (Wittrock 2000) which attract many people in Africa. On the other hand modernity has already changed itself. First, it is much more open and diverse than old type modernization theory stated and does not lead to 'the' modern society. This is addressed by the concept of multiple modernities (Eisenstadt 2000), which does not claim that every contemporary society is modern. Second, modernity cannot be seen as an end of history a kind of ideal world but its consequences are ambiguous and challenging. Modernity is no longer understood as an automatic process but as an object of analysis and negotiation, the societies and the theoretical framework of analysis are under constant change and debate. This is addressed by concepts like second modernity, or reflexive modernity (Beck et al. 2001; Giddens 1990)

All these concepts underline that life in new reflexive modernities is much less predetermined and normatively set than the utopia of modernity once promised. The 'modern' states are probably facing uncertainty that is common in Africa. However, the ways and the means (social, economic and political) to cope with this uncertainty are still different. Seen in global perspective, the people in the North and their countries are still an exception, maybe a wealthy exception. Growing uncertainty challenges this exceptional status. The well-organized system of institutions is increasingly under pressure and loosing the trust people once had in them. State, social structures, the economic system and the system of social security are changing in the North. People have to establish their own individual safety nets. Uncertainty about the future grows.

Reflexive modernity and uncertainty tackle questions differently but in complementing ways. Reflexive modernity points at a situation in the modern industrialized states where the false feeling of a secure future is eroding and uncertainty points at as situation where the hopes for a secure future created by reliable institutions is disappointed. Against this background research on 'uncertainty' in Africa may be important for Europe as an example how things might turn out. Probably we may 'learn from Africa' instead of Africa learning from Europe. In this sense research on Africa using a comparative approach will be challenging not only for Africanists but also for social science in general.

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Zusammenfassung

Der Beitrag präsentiert Schlüsselkonzepte für soziologische Forschung in Afrika, die zugleich als bedeutsam für die allgemeinsoziologische Debatte angesehen werden. Für die Integration des bereits vorhandenen Fallstudienwissens benötigen wir einen vergleichenden Ansatz. Dieser bietet die Chance die Falle zwischen vereinfachenden Generalisierungen über Afrika als Ganzes und der Begrenzung auf vereinzelte Fallstudien zu überwinden. Zwei Forschungsfelder werden zur Umsetzung des vergleichenden Ansatzes vorgeschlagen. Erstens, der Staat in Afrika sollte als gesellschaftliche Institution, die sich im Alltag konstituiert, ver-

standen werden. Zweitens sollte die Soziologie Kategorien zur Beschreibung sozi-aler Differenzierung entwickeln. Denn bislang werden in den Afrikastudien veral-tete Konzepte von Klasse und Schicht verwendet, die weit hinter dem aktuellen Stand der Forschung in der Soziologie zurück bleiben. Als begriffliche Klammer zur Verbindung von Afrikaforschung mit der theoretischen Soziologie können 'Unsicherheit' und 'reflexive Moderne' dienen.

Schlüsselwörter

Afrika südlich der Sahara, Afrikaforschung, Soziologie, Vergleichende Wissenschaft, Stand der Forschung, Forschungsgegenstand, Theorie, Staatstheorie, Soziale Differenzierung

Résumé

Cet article présente des concepts-clés pour la recherche sociologique en Afrique qui sont importants en même temps à l'égard du débat sociologique en général. Pour l'intégration des connaissances provenant des études de cas déjà disponibles, nous avons besoin d'une approche comparative. Celle-ci donne l'occasion de sur-monter le dilemme existant entre les généralisations sur l'Afrique en tant que telle, d'une part, et la limitation aux études de cas ponctuelles, d'autre part. Deux champs de recherche sont proposés. Premièrement, l'Etat en Afrique devrait être compris comme une institution sociale qui se constitue au quotidien. Deuxième-ment, la sociologie devrait développer des catégories pour la description des diffé-renciations sociales. Jusqu'à présent, on utilise en effet dans le domaine des études africaines des concepts surannés de classe et de couche sociale, ce qui ne reflète pas le niveau actuel de la recherche en sociologie. Les termes d' 'incertitude' et de 'modernité réflexive' peuvent servir à relier les études africaines à la sociologie théorique.

Mots clés

Afrique subsaharienne, études africaines, sociologie, sciences comparées, état de la recher-che, objet de recherche, théorie, théorie de l'Etat, différenciation sociale

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