

Theories of Society and Cross-Border Sociology: Report on the Conference "Globalisation – Transnationalisation – Society: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue between Theories of Society and Cross- Border Studies" at the Center for Interdisciplinary Research, Bielefeld University on 15–16 February 2018

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Anja Weiß | Veranstaltungsbericht | 03.05.2018

Theories of Society and Cross-Border Sociology

Report on the Conference "Globalisation – Transnationalisation – Society: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue between Theories of Society and Cross-Border Studies" at the Center for Interdisciplinary Research, Bielefeld University on 15–16 February 2018

Prior to planning this conference, the organizers (of which I was one) had already given a lot of thought to promoting a dialogue between scholars working on theories of society and those in the field of cross-border studies. One organizer, who was previously a board member in the German Sociological Association's (DGS) Section on Social Inequality and the Analysis of Social Structure, mentioned the idea of a conference of this kind to her colleagues, but somehow it did not gain momentum. Then, a proposal was formally submitted to the DGS Section on Sociological Theory. When no response was forthcoming nine months later, the organizers decided to realize the conference on their own, which took another three years. Given this experience, we were pleased and a bit surprised when many internationally renowned sociologists accepted the invitation to speak. In the end, the conference took place with the help of the Center for Interdisciplinary Research Bielefeld and with support from the Main Research Area Transformation of Contemporary Societies at the University of Duisburg-Essen. Although this groundbreaking conference was organized and funded by German social science, the results will first be published in English by a non-German publisher.

The fact that realizing the conference was not easy is not a mere coincidence. German theorists still find it difficult to engage with a number of critical theories that have achieved an almost hegemonic status in the English-language social sciences. The more international scholarship in global and cross-border studies, on the other hand, offers grand narrations, but has not systematically translated these into social theory. And neither researchers who have presented their theories in English nor those writing in German have felt the need to engage with empirical findings from "marginal" fields such as research on migration or on the situation in transitioning societies. The conference attempted to address precisely these gaps by asking scholars in all the above mentioned fields to answer fundamental questions about the relationship between theorizing about society and empirical findings from cross-border and postcolonial studies.

One cluster of answers centered on differentiation theories. SYLVIA WALBY (Lancaster), who opened the conference, drew on complexity theory to distinguish between the economy, the polity, civil society, and violence as institutional domains, on the one hand, and regimes of inequality such as gender, class, or race, on the other. In my lecture, I took up this thought and argued in favor of combining a Luhmannian systems theory, in order to grasp content-differentiated institutional orders, and a Bourdieusian field theory, in order to conceptualize politically contested regimes of inequality. I called on those offering macrosocial globalization accounts like Walby's and Wallerstein's to explicate how people and their capabilities are included in their macrosocial analyses. In dealing with horizontal Europeanization, MARTIN HEIDENREICH (Oldenburg) looked at Bourdieusian professional fields, which directly involve (mostly professional) actors in Europeanization and social space. In doing so he addressed implicit changes in the lifeworld and social connectivity as a result of cross-border processes.

The second panel followed up on the subject of field theories but related field concepts to different social entities. ZSUZSA GILLE (Illinois) highlighted the fact that state socialist societies as well as so-called "transitioning" societies are often defined in relation to core capitalist societies rather than in their own right. Theories that directly address state socialism are formalist theories that treated Eastern European countries as a sui generis social formation. What is missing here are more nuanced concepts that accept that these societies are part of transnational connectivities or a transnational field. CHRISTIAN SCHMIDT-WELLENBURG (Potsdam) advocated a perspective that examines transnational social fields and their actors in terms of how they complement and extend, overlap and compete with nation-states and the (political) actors who position themselves within the respective nation-state framework. In their contributions, BETTINA MAHLERT (Aachen) and GREGOR BONGAERTS (Duisburg-Essen) reached out to colleagues in the rival Bourdieusian and Luhmannian camps. As a Luhmannian systems theorist, Bettina Mahlert reconstructed Luhmann's effort to deviate from a thick notion of the nation-state and society by presenting a "thin" notion of a world society connected by communication and organizations as the remnants of thick sociability. She showed that Luhmann ignores an important concept that is particularly relevant in transnational migration studies: community. In contrast to organizations, communities deliver goods not for an audience but rather for their members, by supposing that all members will contribute to the common good. As a Bourdieusian field theorist, Gregor Bongaerts argued that orthodox field theory puts too much emphasis on fields as arenas of struggle. While this is a valid way to think of fields, fields can also be conceptualized as forms of imputation. In Bongaerts' reading, struggles within fields concern the rules of the game. So fields are not only defined by

actors' participation but can also be seen as contexts in which specific rules hold. This would be a variant of Bourdieusian field theory that reaches out to Luhmannian theorizing.

The third conference session aimed to link conceptual proposals from transnational and gender/intersectional studies to social theory and theorizing about society. JANINE DAHINDEN's (Neuchâtel) contribution related the concept of symbolic boundaries to the analysis of borders and border regimes. In a final presentation on the first day, ANNA AMELINA (Cottbus-Senftenberg) proposed rethinking the concept of society by using assemblage theory and considering social processes of spatialization (at the global, transnational, national, and local levels) as produced within such societal assemblage(s).

Epistemological questions took center stage on the second day of the conference. In a historical-sociological analysis of the discipline of sociology in India, SUJATA PATEL (Hyderabad) showed that sociology was imported as something that Indian society should aspire to in the process of (colonial) modernization and creating a "proper" nation-state. Indians were also encouraged to examine their own history, but this was done by anthropologists (and in particular orientalists), on the assumption that this history and thought would be backward and idiosyncratic. Sociological concepts, Patel argued, must be deconstructed, because the sociologists who devise them are paid by states seeking legitimation for modernization projects. In the Global North, fundamental self-reflexion on the perpetration of epistemological violence has neither occurred nor can it be expected. When asked whether Indian sociologists could move towards the center stage of a globalizing sociology, Patel wondered where the material base needed to develop a grand theory could come from. Patel also stressed that it is impossible to do global sociology without understanding how the binaries labeled as Self and Other, Europe and the Orient, modernity and tradition were constituted.

The latter point was highlighted by SHELLEY FELDMAN (Cornell), who, as a regional specialist and a sociologist also trained in anthropology, held that binaries are themselves a consequence of processes of exclusion and that "exclusion" in itself is a problematic term. It is more accurate to talk instead about "in situ displacement" and about different forms of inclusion. Thus, Europe and India have always been co-constituted, and, in the process of the (colonial) construction of state forms, different populations corresponding to these states were produced. Understanding the co-constituency of national and regional spaces requires moving away from fixed categorical concepts such as class, gender, and race and towards more process-oriented ones such as class formation, gendering, and racialization.

Along the lines of processes of co-constituency emphasized by Patel and Feldman, MANUELA BOATCĂ (Freiburg) focused on what she termed “forgotten Europes”, using the example of Europe’s remaining colonial possessions in the Caribbean and their corresponding geographical referent, Caribbean Europe. She argued that the sociologically unthinkable concept as well as the reality of Caribbean Europe fundamentally challenges established understandings of Europe’s internal and external borders as well as conventional views of sovereignty and the nation-state. When taking colonial possessions of core powers into account, both in historical perspective and today, it becomes possible to reinscribe the transnational experiences of peoples and regions racialized as non-European, non-Western and non-White as well as the multiple entanglements between Europe and its colonies into sociological thought, a move that Boatcă referred to using Lionnet and Shih’s term of “creolizing theory”.

KATHYA ARAÚJO (Santiago, Chile) agreed with Patel that Northern concepts exert hegemony in the Global South. In particular, the normative character of the concept of modernity systematically produces a deficit discourse in formerly colonized regions such as Latin America. Using the example of her extensive empirical research on individualization in Chile, she showed that the notion of *institutionalized* individualization responds to strong (welfare) states and may not work in Latin America. This said, individualization is also observed in the Global South, but in her research takes the form of agentic individualism.

The conference was concluded by a session focusing on social change. THOMAS FAIST (Bielefeld) used the example of climate-change-induced expulsion in order to argue for the integration of ecological—and thus material—processes into the theory of society. TOBIAS WERRON (Bielefeld) showed that nationalism is not new and that the focus on explicit and antagonistic forms of nationalism obscures the “banal” nationalism implicit for example in the United Nations and other inter-“national” institutions. FELIX BÜHLMANN’s (Lausanne) studies of elites in Switzerland showed a gradual change in national elites through contestation of international factions and their international capital.

In sum, most Northern theorists argued for differentiation-theoretical approaches, albeit using divergent concepts such as the transnational professional field, the institutional domain or the system. Juxtaposed to this line of argument was the foundational critique articulated by researchers from the Global South that grand theory is based on a state-centered process of colonialization. Proponents of this critique either work towards a historical sociology in which central concepts such as “society” are dissolved in process categories “societalization”, in which the state-centeredness of sociology and its implicit

banal nationalism and androcentrism become apparent. They use empirical research in order to embed cases in a larger set of relations (Boatcă, Gille) or they revisit traditional sociological categories to create them anew (Araújo).

After the conference was over, one of the participants wondered how this kind of discourse might be institutionalized within the sociology of inequality on a more regular basis. After all, the conference addressed and partially answered foundational questions: What is society? How can society be thought about beyond the nation-state frame? Is sociological theory rotten at its core, because sociologists promote notions of modern statehood that neglect transnational phenomena and are invested in colonizing projects? Can the heterogeneity of relations of inequality and institutional domains be thought together and if so, how exactly can that be done? I agreed wholeheartedly that this discourse should be continued. A day after the conference ended, I realized that I cannot think of any place in German sociology where I could foresee that happening.

Conference Program (PDF)

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