

The Flow of Concepts and Institutions

Heidelberg, 6–8 October, 2010

In October 2010 Heidelberg University's Cluster of Excellence "Asia and Europe in a Global Context" held its three-day annual conference on the theme of "The Flow of Concepts and Institutions". The main focus of the conference was to explore concepts of governance and religiosity from a transcultural perspective.

The opening keynote lecture, "European visions of liberty - a genealogy", by Quentin Skinner (London), focused on the complex history of the concept of liberty, individual freedom in particular. Identifying freedom as Europe's prime "export" concept, Skinner sketched a genealogy of the rival historical definitions given by prominent Anglophone thinkers.

On the second day, the first full podium discussion continued to unravel the contested deployments of key terms of political theory past and present. Bo Strath's (Florence) conceptual history of "governance" identified the struggles involved in defining concepts which, he argued, is a political process in itself. Examining views from 17th century Germany on governance processes in Mughal India, Antje Flüchter (Heidelberg) highlighted the relevance of the then prevalent concept of "gute policey".

The second podium discussion explored how societies, designated as "traditional", react to concepts and institutions classified as "modern". Reflecting on the idea of conceptual flows, Niraja Gopal Jayal (New Delhi) showed how the notion of "legal citizenship" travelled the same geographical trajectory over different time periods, acquiring a differentiated quality based on its local appropriations. Rudolf Wagner (Heidelberg) explored the function of metaphors in becoming vehicles of discourse and providing rallying points of public imagination and action.

The afternoon session was divided into four separate panels. The focus of the panel "The politics of conceptual change" was the interaction of existing East Asian and newly introduced Western concepts and terminology of government, polity, and religion. The panel "Exhibitions" examined "modern art" and the institution of modern art museums as two entangled concepts that have determined the field of art production across Asia and Europe in the 20th century to the present day. The third panel explored aspects of governance in relation to phenomena, notions and institutional forms that traverse national and cultural borders. Finally, the Cluster's IT infrastructure (Heidelberg Research Architecture) featured the projects currently being developed, as well as the tools already available to assist the Cluster members in their transcultural research.

The second day ended with the keynote lecture by Sobhanlal Datta Gupta (Kolkata), who addressed the impact of Marxism in Asia after the Russian revolution. Taking as examples the communist leaderships in the Middle East, China, Korea, Vietnam and India, he argued that, since the idea of revolution and the related concepts of social and political change had been defined in the West, Asian Marxists had to adapt them to their own cultural backgrounds.

Two podium discussions dedicated to the overarching theme of "Conceptualizing religiosity" opened the third day of the conference. The first podium discussion consisted of two papers. Volkhard Krech's (Bochum) presentation raised important questions regarding the contemporary debate and current challenges faced by scholars studying religion, both from a historical as well as a present-day perspective. Joachim Friedrich Quack's (Heidelberg) paper dealt specifically with the flow of deities between ancient Egypt and its neighboring countries.

In the second podium discussion on "Conceptualizing religiosity", Inken Prohl (Heidelberg) proposed "transreligion" as a new analytical category for the study of religion. The advantage of approaching religiosity from this perspective lies in its wide applicability and its ability to capture recent developments. Mark Juergensmeyer (Santa Barbara) portrayed religious violence as a global phenomenon triggered by a loss of faith in secular nationalism.

The afternoon of the third day was divided into two sessions with three panels each. The panelists on "Secret intelligence" analyzed the relevance of undercover knowledge-gathering in pre-modern societies, illustrating how concrete pieces of information about practices and institutions were exchanged between Asia and Europe. The following section on an archaeological perspective on the transfer of ideas attempted to present case studies that document the existence of "global" interactions within and among pre-

modern societies. The panel “The pre-modern reconsidered” analyzed the migration and appropriation of religious concepts within East Asia.

In her acclaimed film, whose screening opened the last block of panels, Deepali Gaur Singh (New Delhi) explored the multi-faceted lives of the Afghan diaspora in Germany as it attempts to re-build a social identity amid discourses of alienation and assimilation in the host country. The contributions to the panel “Governing health in South Asia with European institutions” addressed the impact of Western medical ideas and practices on the contemporary Indian health system. Pictorial representations of the cultural “other” and the motivations for adjustments and the re-contextualization of these depictions were the topic of the last regular panel, “The pen and the brush”.

In the concluding plenary session Harald Fuess (Heidelberg), Niraja Gopal Jayal, David Jacobson (Tampa), Subrata Mitra (Heidelberg) and Madeleine Herren-Oesch (Heidelberg) discussed the relevance of the Cluster’s agenda to the concerns of the broader public, as well as the contribution in terms of concepts and methodologies that it can make to the ongoing study of transculturality. In commenting on the diversity of research at the Cluster, Jayal called for a more cautious and discriminating use of the analytical concept of ‘flow’, one of the hallmark terms of the Cluster’s methodological arsenal. Jacobson pointed out that if any methodology is to be universally accepted it must have a multi-operational approach and suggested diversification as a strategy for the pursuit of knowledge. Fuess welcomed the importance given to visual material in the Cluster’s research and acknowledged the difficulties in identifying concepts that are truly universal. In conclusion, Herren-Oesch emphasized that a move towards a global history of concepts could help bridge the gap between area studies and related disciplines.

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