KNOWLEDGE AND SOCIETY IN TIMES OF UPHEAVAL

Conference organized by the Forum Transregional Studies and the Max Weber Foundation — German Humanities Institutes Abroad, in Berlin, November 20-21, 2018. Conveners: Andreas Eckert (Humboldt University Berlin), Simone Lässig (GHI Washington), Franz Waldenberger (German Institute for Japanese Studies, Tokyo). Particpants: Xóchitl Bada (University of Illinois at Chicago), Frank Bösch (Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung, Potsdam), Omar Al-Ghazzi (London School of Economics), Nataliya Gumenyuk (hromadske.ua, Kiev), Amr Hamzawy (Stanford University/ Wissenschaftskolleg Berlin), Jeannette Hofmann (Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung), Jan C. Jansen (GHI), Johann Kranz (Ludwig-Maximillian-Universität, Munich), Leo Lucassen (International Institute of Social History / University of Leiden), Paweł Machcewicz (Polnische Akadenie der Wissenschaften Warschau / Imre-Kertész-Kolleg, Jena), Nicole Mayer-Ahuja (University of Göttingen), Alia Mossallam (Cairo / Alexander von Humbolt-Stiftung), Ernst Dieter Rossmann (Ausschuss für Bildung, Forschung und Technikfolgenabschätzung, Deutscher Bundestag), Anja Senz (University of Heidelberg), James Sidaway (National University of Singapore).

Under the title "Knowledge and Society in Times of Upheaval," scholars from various disciplines discussed the manifold and complex connections between knowledge, society, and mobility from a global perspective at the annual conference of the Forum Transregionale Studien and the Max Weber Foundation in 2018. The conference addresseed four constituent relationships that were debated in separate thematic panels: New infrastructures as drivers of change; discourses and the public sphere; migration and mobility; and the relationship between work and technological transformation. Knowledge and its dissemination defines, controls and maintains power relations. But what happens when knowledge becomes data? How do technological innovations change the relationship between the individual, the state and society? How do societies cope with the unprecedented growth of knowledge and the extent of its dissemination and control?

The first panel, titled "New Infrastructures as Drivers of Change," highlighted the diversity of the concept of infrastructure as an analytical concept. The contributions focused on infrastructures and their function as drivers of structural, socio-political, and economic change. Based on different regional dynamics, the speakers asked

about the influence of infrastructural conditions and circumstances. Sinologist Anja Senz opened the conference with a presentation on the impact of Chinese development narratives and infrastructure investments on local communities in Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar. According to Senz, the geostrategic consequences of China's belt-and-road initiative bring with them a high degree of uncertainty and are both an opportunity and a danger. The presentation provided a motif that was present throughout the conference.

In his lecture, Johann Kranz illustrated the negative side effects of dominant platforms such as Google and Facebook on innovation, competition and society. Network effects and an enormous concentration of data in these companies lead to competitive advantages and disproportionate market power. According to Kranz, regulation by blockchain-controlled decentralized apps would offer the possibility of correcting this and thus curbing the emergence of monopolistic structures in the Internet economy.

The geographer James Sidaway spoke about the political and socio-economic implications of modern security infrastructures in Yangon (Myanmar). The lecture examined the "securitization" of urban change against the backdrop of changing power structures and the complex relationship between government, military and capital in Myanmar. The focus was on the question of the relevance of security infrastructures and actors for the transformation of states and societies.

The second panel, "Discourses and Publics," dealt with the role of different forms of communication and discourses in situations of social upheaval. The speakers discussed how innovations in communication and technology in Eastern Europe or the Middle East transform, transcend or fragment social and political boundaries. Omar Al-Ghazzi explained how children are covered in media reports about the Syrian conflict and what role they play in these reports. Often, he argued, they are constructed as figures who report truthfully and authentically, without being influenced by ideological and geo-political discourses. As such, they fulfill two functions in particular: suggesting "direct experience," on the one hand, and the politicization of competing narratives, on the other.

Nataliya Gumenyuk spoke about disinformation, targeted false reports and populist media strategies in the conflict in Ukraine. Although these are not new phenomena, the worldwide triumph of

authoritarian political movements has given them additional impetus. Gumenyuk made it clear that Western societies are confronted with similar challenges: the return of nationalism, mistrust of political institutions and a high degree of polarization and fragmentation. According to Gumenyuk, the greatest danger for our democracies is not "fake news", but "filter bubbles" and "confirmation biases."

The political scientist Alia Mossallam investigated the question of how stories are written and told in times of political upheaval and how knowledge can be generated, reproduced and made available. A particular difficulty is how to make knowledge about subaltern actors accessible to those who originally produced this knowledge. Mossallam reported on her experiences in conducting history workshops with local communities in Egypt. The main challenges are the multivalence of histories and the inclusion of local communities in knowledge production, lengthy research processes, a lack of financial and institutional support, and state mistrust.

The second day of the conference opened with the panel "Migration and Mobility," which dealt with the interaction of mobility and knowledge in situations of upheaval. Historian Jan C. Jansen devoted his lecture to the political refugee movements during the "Atlantic Revolutions" of 1770-1820, investigating the emergence of knowledge in the form of documents and its significance for the control, representation and spatial location of migrants. Jansen referred to the massive increase in administrative documentation on flight and migration, driven by two seemingly contradictory factors: the attempts of authorities and recipient societies to contain and control migration movements and the need to facilitate these in a world in turmoil.

The Latin American studies scholar Xóchitl Bada formulated the goal of ensuring the workers' rights of migrants universally, regardless of territorial areas. With a focus on Mexico and the USA, she illustrated the problem of the enforcement of workers' rights at home and cross-border worker representation for low-wage migrants. The emergence of transnational networks and global public spheres calling for the transfer of basic workers' rights and protection measures for migrants even after their return to their country of origin has led to new efforts to prevent abuse and exploitation.

The historian Leo Lucassen then explained the role that migration experts play in political and decision-making processes. He referred to personal experiences as an intellectual in the public and political

debate on migration, integration and refugees in the Netherlands. The media are of particular relevance here because they can cause knowledge to be ignored or questioned by counter-narratives, but can also disseminate and strengthen expert knowledge and scientific findings.

The last panel of the conference was devoted to the topic "Labour and Technological Transformation." The debate focused on the so-called fourth industrial revolution, the transformation of labor since the Second World War, and the connections between knowledge, technology, and the transformation of labor in a historical perspective. The sociologist Nicole Mayer-Ahuja examined the influence of digitization on the world of work in the light of conflicts between capital, labor and the state. According to Mayer-Ahuja, the widespread view that new technologies have led to the disappearance of entire professions is too one-sided. Current trends in digitization are always an opportunity and produce different results depending on the respective balance of power. One problem, however, is the lack of regulation of technological development, which reinforces processes of precarization and competence polarization as well as flexibilization.

Frank Bösch analysed how German civil servants, scientists and companies gained and constructed knowledge through visits to China in the course of the fundamental economic reforms under Deng Xiaoping, which was only accessible through personal observations. Bösch described how Western observers and companies tried to obtain detailed information about the Chinese market. This knowledge led to a special perception of China, which was highly dependent on the specific impressions of the visitors.

Finally, Jeanette Hofmann, Paweł Machcewicz, Ernst Dieter Rossmann and Amr Hamzawy discussed the results of the conference at a roundtable titled "Science and Society at the Borders of Europe." The ambivalent role of science in times of political upheaval became clear. On the one hand, according to Rossman, it functions as an explanatory and mediating medium and thus plays a key role in shaping the public debate, for instance, by pointing out future scenarios. On the other hand, as Hamzawy noted, in countries like Egypt, where scientific discourses and categories are deformed in the context of undemocratic public structures, science itself is also affected. Machcewicz added that the stability of the political and social order was not a matter of course even in the older EU member states. In

Poland he currently sees a process of rejection of rationality, which leads to science being questioned as a legitimate basis for political decisions. In this context, Rossmann stressed the urgency of finding ways to promote the freedom and exchange of science in borderline situations. Borders would not necessarily have to be of a geographical nature, but could also be ideally understood, for example in relation to European ideals of education and freedom. Finally, Hofmann pleaded for a more differentiated view of new technologies in times of political upheaval and argued that social responsibility must not be outsourced to them. Digital technologies should not be understood as an extra-societal phenomenon that only obeyed efficiency requirements and either emancipated or directed societies in authoritarian ways.

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