

Refereed article

Social Order as a Boundary Concept: Unveiling Dichotomies and Conceptualizing Politics

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Summary

This paper introduces social order as an analytical concept that heuristically helps to grasp phenomena related to unwritten rules. It illustrates how the dichotomies of written vs. unwritten rules, formal vs. informal institutions and state vs. society have limited analytical value for understanding societal complexities. Underlying this proposition is the insight that focusing on rules alone neglects the dimension of enforcement. A thorough consideration of the latter shows that even non-statutory rules can be undermined by social practices that do not conform to dominant local or customary norms and come to be seen as “deviant.” Norm pluralism and power resources constitute important factors that inform choices and social (inter-)action in non-Western societies. It is argued that social order relies on the dynamic interplay of social practices and cognitive factors which constantly shape and reshape each other and thus reproduce social order. Empirical examples from contemporary and historical research are explored to illustrate the analytical value of the social-order concept. Refocusing on social practices and their normative underpinnings necessitates paying explicit attention to power relations. It influences the conceptualization of politics and highlights the validity of the social-order approach for understanding local power distribution, decision-making and enforcement — in short, local governance processes. Derived from research in non-Western societies, social order can be considered a “mid-range” concept in the social sciences. The author concludes the paper by highlighting the potential of “social order” as a boundary notion that enables interdisciplinary communication and, ideally, transdisciplinary understanding of complex political processes.

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Introduction

In recent years, the crisis among the social-science disciplines — particularly comparative politics — has been the subject of growing attention among empirical scholars and theorists (Sayer 1999; Chabal 2005: 476; Neubert 2005: 430; Grotz et al. 2013: 82). Against the backdrop of globalization and the way it has encouraged diversification and fragmentation of lifestyles, political orders and paths of development in different parts of the world, the interest in what is called “unwritten rules”