

ASIEN

The German Journal on Contemporary Asia

C 13206

ISSN 0721-5231

Nr. 132 | Juli 2014

STRANGE BED FELLOWS? — AREA STUDIES AND DISCIPLINES

- Area Studies cum Disciplines: Asia and Europe from a Transdisciplinary Perspective
- Unwritten Constitutions of Political Rule: Conceptual Approaches to Comparative Area Studies of Asia, the Middle East & North Africa, and Europe
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Printed by DSN – Druck Service Nord, 21465 Wentorf, info@dsndruck.de

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Refereed article

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

Katja Mielke

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.

Manuscript received on 2014-01-17, accepted on 2014-04-23

Keywords: Afghanistan, area studies, boundary concept, local governance, local politics, political theory, power, social order

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”

has grown enormously and reconfirmed the significance of locality-based knowledge, which has traditionally been provided by the field of area studies. In the past, area-studies scholars, who are conventionally “othered” in academia as being unsystematic empirical-data generators without any concepts and systematic approaches of their own, were usually ascribed the role of recording unwritten rules, which were often connoted as informal. From the perspective of functionality, the aim of disciplines such as political science and sociology was to subjugate what was perceived as being informal to the dominant epistemology of state-centrism. Consequently, a conventional viewpoint would ascribe a negative connotation and inferior status to the informal that would have to be remedied and overcome by formalization in its various guises. This way of perceiving and interpreting factors that did not seem to fit into Western categories caused several dichotomies to be cultivated such as formal vs. informal, unwritten vs. written rules and state vs. society.

Today, since representatives of conventional area studies have started to hark back to the so-called “systematic” disciplines (which suggests that they are possibly in a state of crisis as serious as that of area studies itself), the debate is beginning to focus on content issues again (Mielke and Hornidge 2014). Comparative politics is challenged to justify the units and levels of analytical comparisons across national boundaries and positivist research designs with a large statistical sample (large *n*). Scholars researching non-Western societies seek to identify what are known as “mid-range concepts” (Houben 2013), i.e. observations about patterned relationships between certain objects, derived from close involvement with local societies, ideally through field research.¹ Mid-range concepts serve endeavors at hermeneutical epistemics and thus cannot be taken as theories (defined as explanations of cause-and-effect relationships), but they prove to yield analytical value for the understanding of (trans-)locality-based social processes. Ideally, these can be tested, verified and falsified in other parts of the world. Some examples of what could be described as mid-range concepts originating in locality-based research can be seen in terms like “thick description” (Geertz 1987), the “theatre state” (Geertz 1980), Benedict Anderson’s influential concept of “imagined communities” (Anderson 1983) and in the concepts of “moral economy” and “weapons of the weak” elaborated by James Scott (1976, 1985).

In this paper, I suggest that the concept of “social order” qualifies as another mid-range concept and is of analytical value in understanding local politics. Based on observations in the “Second” and “Third World” since the mid-1990s, i.e. in the former Soviet Union (Russia and the Central Asian Republics), Eastern Central

¹ This idea of mid-range concepts is similar to Merton’s conceptualization of sociological theories of the middle range (Merton 1949), but it maintains modesty, given the general doubt about the possibility of deriving “true theories” in social science. Nevertheless, mid-range concepts overlap with Merton’s criteria for middle-range theory in that they ought to be simple and provide an “image that gives rise to inferences” (Merton 1949: 39) and thus allows the formulation of guiding theses for empirical enquiry.

Europe, Afghanistan and Pakistan, I argue that the particular value of the social-order approach to political scientists and sociologists lies in its epistemic turn away from state-centrism. This enables a profoundly different way of seeing things; it takes account of social practices and the cognitive factors that inform their operation in addition to putting methodological nationalism in its place. The state is merely ascribed the potential role of one of many potentially relevant actors, but not necessarily the dominant one. In the same vein, statutory law is but one dimension and frame of reference accounting for the social (and political) organization of societies.

The approach taken in this paper² is threefold. First, I shall introduce the concept of social order, its origin, relevance and the constitutive mechanisms that are assumed to underlie it. In a second step, I will use some empirical examples from contemporary research in Afghanistan and Pakistan to illustrate the limitations of the conventionally applied dichotomies of formal vs. informal, written vs. unwritten rules and even state vs. society. I argue that a close consideration of the enforcement dimension of rules shows that even non-statutory rules can be undermined by social practices that do not conform to dominant local or customary norms and therefore come to be viewed as “deviant.” A change in perspective, however, highlights the plurality of norms that inform choices and social (inter-)action in practice. Analytical refocusing on the process dimension of social practices and underlying cognitive factors, which are suggested to reproduce social order constantly, is particularly relevant for understanding local governance dynamics, i.e. power inequalities, decision-making and enforcement processes at the community level. The applied non-state-centric perspective embodies consequences for the conceptualization of politics. In a third step, I shall highlight the potential of the social-order concept to serve as a boundary notion by enabling interdisciplinary communication and trans-disciplinary understanding.

Social order as an analytical concept

The “project of statehood” has been unquestioned in global affairs ever since modernity conventionalized the state as the main norm-setting and norm-enforcing institution (Weber 2005 [1922]; Jellinek 1900; Almond 1988; Skocpol 1985). Even if steering capacities and regulatory functions of nation states have become increasingly questioned beyond the constitutional-regime level, for example in the realm of security and economic affairs, and given the tendencies towards supra- and transnationalization of aspects of governance, statehood still remains the main ordering

2 This article is based on empirical research carried out in non-Western societies over more than a decade. However, only my current affiliation as a member of the BMBF-funded research network “Crossroads Asia. Conflict, Migration, Development” (2011–14) has allowed me to systematize the insights from previous and ongoing research. Active discussions among members of the network about the role of social-science- and area-based knowledge generation as well as subsequent reflection about the “area studies debate” inspired the framing for this paper. The sources of the empirical examples are mentioned below.

principle of societal politics and for much of the analysis thereof. Macro-sociology's preoccupation with methodological nationalism — taking the modern nation state as a frame of reference for historical, political and sociological enquiries (Mann 1990: 15; Zangl and Zürn 2003) — further consolidated states and statehood as a frame of analysis. In the works of ethnographers, anthropologists and sociologists who carry out micro- and meso-level studies with a primary focus on individuals and groups (“local societies”), statehood is often studied “from below,” and state-society interfaces through an analysis of everyday practices and modes of representation of a particular state and its policies (Ferguson 1994; Scott 1998; Gupta 1995; Christophe 2005; Ledeneva 1998; Easter 2000).³ However, most authors ascribe to the Weberian concept of the state as an *Anstaltsstaat* (literally, *Anstaltsbetrieb*; Weber 2005 [1922]: 29), which is closely linked to the idea of order.⁴

In social theory and sociology, ontological aspects of what social order is and what its constitutive components are have been subjected to extensive debates in spite of the seeming omnipresence of conflicts, societal changes and multi-level complexity (Münch 1996: 127). Although a “social-order theory” has not evolved so far, several sociologists and representatives of related subjects (anthropology, political science, law and economics) have proposed various ideas on how to grasp social order from an epistemological point of view, especially “how social order is possible” (Parsons 1951) and how it can be investigated (Hechter and Horne 2003). The idea that social order provides a stable equilibrium between ordering and disordering moments lies at the heart of the majority of sociological works (Anter 2007: 50). In these studies, order is seen as a gradual phenomenon that implies the absence of order at the negative end and the achievement of peaceful relations between individuals at the other (Wrong 1994: 2, 20). Social order is commonly seen as a matter of degree where different levels can be crafted out and sequenced according to criteria like collective orientation of action. Consequently, one common reading argues “the more [...] individual behavior is collectively oriented, the higher the level of order” (Hechter and Horne 2003: 27). Behind this is Thomas Hobbes' concept of the individual being at war with every other man — a war of all against all — which outlines the idea of a strong central force to tame people's destructive behavior, viz. the Leviathan (Hobbes 1962 [1651]). Hobbes is regarded as the first person to have

3 The topic of statelessness or stateless societies mainly resounded among social anthropologists (Halbmayer 2003; Sigrist 1979; Elwert 2001; von Trotha and Klute 2001) and social scientists of all disciplines with a historical focus, who analysed long-term phenomena (Mann 1990/1991/1998/2001; Elias 1997; Popitz 2004 [1968]), either by them addressing the subject directly or by them ignoring statehood as a lens for analytical enquiry. In the political sciences' school of International Relations, French researchers were among the first to write about the peculiarities of statehood in non-OECD areas, particularly Africa, and they were able to show that the standard state-centric assumptions are not fruitful for political analysis. For an early example, see the joint volume by Bayart et al. (1999).

4 The elaborations in this section rely on a long-term discussion process among members of the ZEF project group on local governance and statehood in the Amu Darya border region, the preliminary results of which were presented with further evidence in the working paper authored by Mielke et al. (2011).

posed “the problem of order” and, with the idea of the Leviathan, to have offered a solution that has enlightened thinkers of such different strands as political economy, ethnomethodology, general sociological theory and system theory to equally propose answers. Essentially, the repertoire of resolutions is broadly norm-based (Durkheim 1992 [1930]; Merton 1938; Cloward 1959; Parsons 1951; Weber 2005 [1922]; Habermas 1995 [1981]), holding that large-scale social consensus is the prerequisite for (national) societal integration.

That said, different disciplines deal with aspects of social order by trying to comprehend the status of certain social environments and apply a normative perspective that contrasts order with conflict. Today, the reasons for phenomena like state failure, dysfunctionality of institution-building, diagnosed persisting underdevelopment and — historically — the disintegration of the former Eastern bloc are ascribed to the influence of “bad governance,” which manifests itself in informal institutions and unwritten rules, including factors like ethnicity and religion. Even among the nations that are best off economically, observed processes of erosion or deformation of democracies and tendencies leading to the stabilization or re-stabilization of authoritarian regimes are interpreted with regard to the unwritten rules of political culture. For non-Western “developing” and transition countries, the democracy- and institution-building imperative calls for the replacement — or at least modification — of local governance institutions, which are viewed as vestiges of the past, with “democratic” rules of governance (Bardhan and Mookherjee 2006; Brinkerhoff 2005). Underlying this understanding of non-democratic, formal and/or local institutions is the assumption of their dysfunctionality, deficiency and inefficiency, which presumably endangers or undermines political orders. This diagnosis with its focus on outcomes, e.g. eroding democracy, state failure and underdevelopment, proffers too simple a remedy, though, by tracing the causes to the existence of unwritten or informal rules. The “rule perspective” with its dichotomous focus on formal/written vs. informal/unwritten rules shows only one side of the coin.

In the following, I argue that the focus on outcomes as expressed in (non-)functional status observations is of limited analytical value in understanding the reasons behind the differences in results, i.e. the dynamics that influenced particular outcomes. Likewise, beyond a constitutional-law perspective, the assumption of the formal/statutory superseding the informal/unwritten, which encroaches upon the former, is misleading. Instead, the concept of social order elaborated by Mielke et al. (2011) and developed further by Mielke (2012) offers a more fruitful perspective analytically because it takes both the rule and the enforcement perspective into account.

For the elaboration of social order as an analytical concept, it is necessary to distinguish the implicit normative understanding of social order assumed to be a gradual phenomenon and expressed in status descriptions (see above) from the non-

normative idea of order as a heuristic lens. Contemporary theoreticians largely agree that order can be treated as a non-normative concept and not as something invariably given. Rehberg (1994: 47), for example, states that social order embodies any long-term structuring activity (*dauerhafte Strukturierungsleistung*) in social relationships. His view represents a neutral approach that is usually anything but what can be taken for granted. This is especially true given other researchers' preoccupation with either attempts to "solve the problem of order" by identifying simple causes and outcomes in order to deduct possible social-policy implications (Hechter and Horne 2003) or equating the meaning of social order with that of "system" regularity and predictability (Wrong 1994: 37; Anter 2007: 42). Thus, social order is understood here as a concept that is based on the interrelation between rules and enforcement, particularly social settings as part of entangled social fields.⁵ The specific setting and part of the social field(s) to be observed depend on the particular research interest and have to be defined in a given context, e.g. that of a particular project. The rule dimension refers to written and unwritten rules embodied in institutionalized social practices. The (non-)enforcement dimension embodies underlying cognitive factors I call "moralities," encompassing what other authors have partly conceptualized as mental models (Denzau and North 1994), *habitus* (Bourdieu 1987), "structuration" (Giddens 1984), habits and frames (Esser 2004), symbolic universes (Berger and Luckmann 2001)⁶ or worldviews (Mielke et al. 2011). The interplay between social practices and cognitive factors, which shape and reshape each other constantly, accounts for structured interactions that generate the individuals' and collective protagonists' social reality, including certainty about expectations. It is self-evident that the distinction between moralities and practices merely serves analytical purposes as both are closely interlinked and cannot be observed separately.⁷

Understood as resting on empirically traceable structuring characteristics that underlie the social construction of reality, social order provides a framework to investigate social-interaction processes (*soziales Handeln*) in social, economic or political realms. This said, the emphasis on *social* order distinct from political order, for example, merely serves the purpose of stressing that individuals are social but

5 Underlying these conceptual thoughts is Mann's concept of societies (Mann 1990: 33), according to which societies are made up of network figurations emerging from interactions between people within more or less fixed socio-spatial boundaries. The notion of fields is borrowed from Bourdieu (1987).

6 It is acknowledged that the listed concepts are firmly grounded in rich and profound academic literature and tradition, the evolution and background debates of which cannot be considered here in any approximate way. For the purpose of the argument, the listing is meant to illustrate that the mere existence and popularity of the concepts mentioned accounts for the idea of bounded rationality. They all embody what is termed "moralities," i.e. normative aspects (in the widest sense) that guide human interaction.

7 Conclusions about "moralities" underlying and framing certain social practices can be derived from interview data discussing attitudes, beliefs, perceptions and motives for decisions, strategies or practices and their underlying speech acts (Howell 1997: 13).

not necessarily societal beings (Mann 1990: 34) and that social interaction — even if it does take place indirectly at times — is part of daily life and constitutes human existence. To put it in popular, non-academic terms, it might imply hostile or friendly relations. Furthermore, social conflict is seen as something normal and universal (Cosser 1956; Simmel 1992; Dahrendorf 1979, 1994). However, the mediation of conflicts and contesting claims is inherently political and involves power relations. Thus, every social order is constituted by political processes, and by acknowledging these, the content and meaning of politics will be broadened. Social interactions reflect power relationships that structure social-order settings and also account for political results.

For one perspective, social order provides the frame and basis for social-interaction processes that shape outcomes of differing quality, depending on the dynamics of the interplay of social practices and cognitive factors. Reversely, social order is influenced and restructured by these processes and outcomes at the same time. As a result, it is constantly reproducing itself and never ceases to exist. It is not one universal phenomenon, but is subject to specific contextualization such as a cultural, historical and/or regional setting with differing dynamics and path dependencies over time. Thus, not only one, but several social orders can be imagined. If social order is used as a heuristic lens from the researcher's perspective, it always depends on the research interest and specific question about what the unit and level of enquiry is and, accordingly, which context will gain relevance and validity in a respective case-study analysis of social order (see below).

The idea that social order always persists has two implications. The first is that social order is not a phenomenon with characteristics of increasing or decreasing qualities, i.e. the idea of gradual change in status of a certain order that moves between “complete” and “no” order, disorder or anomie (Merton 1938). A social order is characterized by complex interplay processes that link regulatory practices and rules in the form of norms, values and underlying cognitive factors. It follows from this that social order is not judged by the outcomes and results of these processes (it can be at a point in time, i.e. from a snapshot perspective), but it is constituted by the mechanisms and practices — including the discursive ones — that shape everyday social interactions. In settings where an observer seems to witness anomie, chaos and the like, social order is not absent, but rules persist and social interactions prevail. The second implication is that the peculiarities of social order(s) do not change rapidly because structural variables linked with cognitive factors are ascribed a determining significance. They are more likely to adapt the structuring-restructuring mechanism incrementally than spark a sudden significant overhaul of the regulation of daily affairs among members of a certain society.

Sociologists conceptualize cognitive factors as institutions — beliefs, values, ideas and cognitive scripts that are assumed to have an impact on actors' behavior and thus have explanatory value in understanding macro-sociological phenomena such

as development or economic performance (Durkheim 1995 [1935]: 100). In this view, the broader institutional context affects material and organizational structures, but this linkage functions in reverse. Distinct from both rational choice institutionalism and from the historical strand, sociological institutionalism does not simply presume the existence of institutions. Rather, it aims to explain the generation and persistence of them. Power, on the other hand, has been conceptualized as being embedded in institutions rather than as manifest in individual behavior (Ornert 2006: 451). In addition, the idea of multiple layers of institutions, which form highly diverse figurations depending on the characteristics and directions of “causal” links in different empirical settings, is central to the sociologists’ view (Ornert 2006).

Although sociological institutionalism offers a non-functionalist view of the emergence, persistence and change of institutions, it has been equally criticized for neglecting factors of human agency and ideas (Srivastava 2004: 3). It is remarkable that North’s (1990) concept of institutions as formal rules, informal norms and enforcement mechanisms has been widely cited for defining institutions as “rules of the game.” These rules consist of both formal and informal institutions, but largely ignore the enforcement-mechanisms component, i.e. agency, even though North himself elaborated in depth on the challenges of “typically imperfect” enforcement in the economic realm (1990: 54). In addition, the fact that “cognitive factors” were commonly subsumed under the label of “informal” rules, which have been categorized as institutions alongside “formal rules,” has caused some analytical confusion (Ornert 2006: 450) and has not turned out to be very helpful in empirical research. In view of this, the previous choice of terminology which used to speak of institutions and worldviews as constituting social order (Mielke et al. 2011) was abandoned because cognitive patterns or an ascribed “worldview” could not be distinguished from “institutions” per se, given that the former constitute institutions as well in the sociological tradition. Thus, the analytical distinction between social practices being informed by and informing moralities has been adopted (Mielke 2012).

The identified lack of a coherent definition of institutions among and within institutionalism’s strands has turned out to be less problematic than the normative bias commonly attached to informal vs. formal. Case analyses of the transition in Eastern Europe in the 1990s have illustrated that the theoretical assumptions put forward by North (1990) and the school of New Institutional Economics have been overly determined by an efficiency-oriented perspective that interpreted informal institutions predominantly as constraints to economic growth. Informal institutions were automatically seen as obstructing transformation, “development” and democratization. So the general conclusion was that they had to be overcome — not integrated or accepted and dealt with — in order to transform into a “true democracy” or market economy based on Western standards. The reverse effect, the so-called “informal,” i.e. the functioning of unwritten rules, largely escaped

scholarly attention. The identification that the different roles' informal rules of the game took in these transitions, i.e. enabling and complementing "weak" formal institutions or altering and replacing dysfunctional ones (Helmke and Levitsky 2004: 727ff.), was again a rather outcome-oriented perspective that did not scrutinize the implementation or the process dimension of rule enforcement. Even though North had explicitly mentioned enforcement characteristics, they remained subtle and did not gain explicit attention. Traditional scholarship on the different strands of institutionalism has neglected actors' perceptions and preference formations. In addition, actor-centred institutionalist approaches (Scharpf 1997; Mayntz and Scharpf 1995; Ostrom 2005) lack analytical clarity when it comes to deciphering the stage of rule enforcement. Given that "human agents actively interpret the world and develop discourses that justify the particular worldview that they hold" (Chang and Evans 2000: 18, cited in Srivastava 2004: 20), it is argued here that focusing less on policies as content and outcomes and more on politics as the process dimension of social interaction resulting from the interplay of social practices and moralities enables a more profound understanding of empirical complexities to be achieved.

Unveiling dichotomies and conceptualizing politics

What has been presented as conceptual thoughts so far shall now be enhanced with empirical insights from my own research in order to demonstrate the applicability and added value of the social-order approach. I shall start out by reconfirming the limitations of the formal vs. informal (written vs. unwritten) dichotomy suggested above. For this purpose, it is necessary for me to briefly introduce the research on local resource governance in northeast Afghanistan from which my observations and data have been derived. Insights from a second research project on housing rights and space-making in urban Pakistan serve to illustrate that the social-order lens is not only a valid perspective for societies where statutory law has either not been formulated for certain sectors yet or is largely absent. In more general terms, the research suggests accounting for relational factors, which *de facto* determine political processes and outcomes. In addition, the second case study will highlight the fact that even conventional dichotomous distinctions between state and society do not hold. Furthermore, the case studies reveal the crucial role of power resources versus rights-based factors in shaping politics. It was argued above that the informal-formal divide is not analytically fruitful due to the normative bias with which it is mostly perceived. Given the neglect of agency or what was called "the enforcement dimension," I will now share some insights from long-term research on local resources governance in rural northeast Afghanistan to add another consideration to why this divide needs to be scrutinized from an empirical point of view. Against the backdrop that social order in rural Afghan society was conceptualized as being comprised of a complex tapestry of overlapping governable arenas of social interactions, the aim of the research project was to understand local politics by investigating what drives the allocation, distribution and usage of crucial

livelihood resources — irrigation water, pasture land and fuel wood — in resource-user communities in six districts across three provinces (Mielke 2012). The resource-user communities were taken to represent local governance arenas or fields in which organizing principles of the environmental resource realm could be detected and described as mechanisms that reflect the interplay of social practices and moralities. The latter were operationalized by employing the auxiliary concept of life-worlds (mental positioning/subjectivity) to account for the cognitive dimension. Furthermore, it was assumed that the detected mechanisms could be generalized to allow conclusions to be made about the generic effects their interplay produces and, consequently, to identify peculiarities of the local social order at the time of investigation.

Given the sector-based absence of statutory law (in this case for pasture and land usage as well as water⁸), the analyses put special emphasis on local and customary sources for the allocation, distribution and usage of fuel, pasture and water resources. As it turned out, a great variety of local rules — unwritten in any legal framework⁹ — could be detected.¹⁰ This was contrary to prominent assumptions made by the international aid community at the early stage of intervention in 2005 that the 25 years of war had caused a void not only in technical terms, but also in social institutions. The allocation, distribution and usage of irrigation water, for example, was regulated by a complex system of provisions defining the cropping area (property) and communal work contribution for the maintenance of irrigation infrastructure in different watercourses. Furthermore, the appointment of water managers at the watercourse level, different provisions for the delegation of deputies at primary and even secondary canal levels and the existence of local norms designed to offset upstream-downstream imbalances in access to irrigation water could all be observed. The latter included the rule, for example, that the water manager himself ought to hail from a downstream location in order to avoid a conflict of interest when implementing seasonally pre-agreed rotation schedules when water was scarce. In addition, the idea that water-intensive rice-growing should not be allowed in the upstream command areas was commonly known, and its enforcement was even urged by the provincial irrigation departments.

However, besides the identification of these normative principles, a large gap was detected between their existence and their discursive and ritual reconfirmation on

8 At the data-collection stage of this study, the respective draft legislations (water law, pasture law and land law) were still being processed in parliament and had not been put into effect.

9 At least three different kinds of normative sources can be distinguished: (i) Shari'at and hadiths as Islamic rule provisions, (ii) customary norms and (iii) statutory law. In the absence of statutory law, Shari'at provisions often constitute the only written rules available (viz. those of the Koran). However, given most mullahs' illiteracy, Islamic provisions were usually not cited from written sources.

10 The research relied on qualitative long-term fieldwork with anthropological methods of narrative and semi-structured interviewing, oral history and participant observation. See Mielke (2012).

the one hand and *de facto* allocation practices on the other. Water theft was found to be widely practised despite local norms and established rotation schedules, and rice-growing upstream intensified. Trees were cut down despite a governmental ban on logging and locally appointed forest guards were observed to rent out the forest instead of restricting log cutting. Pastoralists were denied access to pastures they had customarily used and for which they even held title deeds. The analysis of differential access patterns within local user communities further highlighted that even though the ability to benefit from irrigation water or rangeland resources is based on *de facto* violations of local norms and regulations, underlying structural-relational factors that formed bundles of power¹¹ existed. Place/location, authority/social status/force, social identity and economic resources/wealth were found to constitute power resources in this particular study context. Their influence, including how different factors/assets are combined, determined the enforcement of existing rules (e.g. the local rule-based allocation of water) or rule-bending according to the personal interest of those endowed with the most power resources. As a result, it is not the existence of rights or norms per se that regulates everyday affairs — in this case the governance (allocation, distribution, usage) of environmental resources in particular user communities — but the availability of power resources that helps to enforce claims. Accordingly, the unequal distribution of assets among different members of resource-user communities accounts for socio-economic differences and subsequent access patterns via differential power relations. The largest landowners, for example, were found to have plots of land primarily upstream and to have appointed a water manager to take care of them. Even though all the farmers, both small and large landholders, had accepted the manager's position and were collectively paying his salary and contributing to infrastructure maintenance, the large landowner, often a commander in the previous war, would always get enough water in times of scarcity, while others' crops would wither away.

Resource community members' quiet conformity with such highly unjust and disadvantaging practices, which are partially interpreted as providing protection and security and thus certainty in terms of expectations (i.e. *Ordnungssicherheit*, Popitz 2004), can be traced back to cognitive inclinations on the part of the resource users who assign the existing conditions a degree of value (*Ordnungswert*, Popitz 2004). Behind this is the realization that any type of objection and resistance by taking concrete action is perceived to put whatever the individuals hold dear at risk (land property, harmonious relations with fellow water users, family relations, etc.). Conscious of the fact that justice can be bought or accessed via "the right people" (patrons, friends, brokers), the personal accumulation of power resources, i.e. wealth and the association of one's family with powerful networks, constitute existential

11 I owe this notion to Ghani (1995) (cited in Ribot and Peluso 2003: 158). However, he spoke of a "bundle of powers," while I prefer to speak of bundles of power *resources* because in contrast to power, which only exists in relationships (Foucault 2005; Bourdieu 1979; Lukes 2005; Mann 1990), power resources can be possessed by individuals and corporate actors.

strategies (“investments”) employed by members of rural society. As a result of such investments in the order at hand, existing inequalities are being perpetuated and the structuring features of the local social order reconfirmed. The value assigned to the order is a manifestation of moralities; it undermines the potential desire for change.

Without delving too deeply into the details of this particular case study, it is important to note that the enforcement of rights or norms was shown to depend on the availability of power resources. Besides this, under conditions where statutory law is largely absent, property rights turn out to be irrelevant and access analysis constitutes a more fruitful approach analytically (Ribot and Peluso 2003). The same study also showed that the large-scale appropriation of district governments by rural elites, the role of the administration as a source of rent extraction for appointed government staff and the prevalence of webs of personalized relationships that connect office holders to a respective constituency rather than electoral mandates based on programmes and policies have rendered the distinction between “state” and society obsolete. A second study in urban Pakistan has reconfirmed this finding.¹² Even though the context in Pakistan is characterized by the prevalence of written rules and the working of an executive based on highly differentiated government machinery, the empirical analysis of space-making in low-income areas has shown high levels of interdependence between government officers and low-income dwellers.

Just like in rural Afghanistan, local development and the obtainment of notification of a non-demolishable area are negotiated between local politicians, elites of a respective community and bureaucrats of executing government departments. Kickbacks from development contracts, the misuse of public offices for personal benefit and the generally high degree of venality exhibited by government departments at all administrative levels render existing legal provisions meaningless for the average low-income dweller. The rule of law is substituted by personal relationships and networks along the lines of belonging to different identity groups based on caste (*biraderi*), ethnicity, religion, party affiliation and other such factors. While this is nothing new and merely highlights what is usually described as the inhibiting influence of political culture on democratic development, the social-order approach calls for an analysis of the underlying dynamics and political process dimensions. The enquiry into mobilization processes and collective action of rural low-income dwellers found no evidence of any motivation to change the existing order. Although individual families do desire to have a house and thus occupy government land in many cases, the obtainment of title deeds, i.e. of legally sanctioned property rights for the plot the house was built on, did not usually constitute a political aim of low-income dwellers in irregular settlements. They

12 This research was carried out within the aforementioned research network, “Crossroads Asia” (see fn 2). In line with the network’s mobility paradigm, the case study seeks to investigate social-mobilization processes and the collective action strategies that low-income urban dwellers employ to improve their living conditions. Research has been carried out in Lahore and Karachi (Pakistan) so far. See Mielke (2014) for an analysis of the initial findings.

sufficed with their “stay-notification,” given that any other arrangement would have been too costly. Their comparatively modest power resources are constituted by collected daily wages, which are used to bribe government officials for the illegal provision of electricity, water and rounds of surveys to establish a documentary record of the newly evolved settlement and thus enable claim-making for the future notification and regularization of the settlement.

The negotiation of needs and interests behind what is usually perceived to constitute processes of development (or state- and institution-building in the case study above) is utterly political because it is contested and depends on the availability of power resources. Given that social change requires collective resources to be a precondition for social mobilization, low-income dwellers cannot be expected to generate the necessary amount as any mobilization on their part takes place to obtain resources in order to ensure their basic livelihood. For this purpose, they engage in personalized dependency relationships, and patronage subsequently exploits the legal provisions, i.e. the “written rules.” According to this logic, investments in the existing order therefore perpetuate and legitimize it, thereby inhibiting mobilization and change. This insight scrutinizes the popular assumption of empowerment for change in international development and suggests reconsidering aid instruments to promote democracy, especially regarding who or which group is to be aided in which way.

Both studies highlight the fact that the distribution of power resources, i.e. structural-relational factors, prevails over rights-based norms, be they statutory or local/customary, and it shapes the interactions that constitute a certain social order. As a third example, Wilde (2012; Wilde and Mielke 2013) submitted a historical study of eighteenth-century chronicles and nineteenth-century written sources such as travelogues and oral-history accounts from the first half of the twentieth century about local representation and power structures in what is now the northern part of Afghanistan. His findings stem from a period preceding national statehood and cover the evolution of statehood aided by local elites, reconfirming the significance of the social-order approach. Read from a social-order perspective, the sources allow for an identification of patronage, gift exchanges and mediation practices as instruments of rule and authority (Ger. *Herrschaft*). Authority itself is exercised within extended patron-client networks in which the organization of territory or statehood is unimportant. Ruling and ruled subjects’ *habitus* is ingrained in the particular “worldview” structures (in Wilde’s choice of terminology [2012]) and is structured by patron-client relations and reciprocity. It also accounts for the strong resilience of the main features of the investigated social order.

Summary and outlook: social order as a boundary concept

Given its evolution from empirical research and related attempts to make sense of order in disorder, social order as a mid-range concept can be summarized as combining several advantages in comparison with conventional, state-centric

perspectives of looking at politics. First, it allows for the analysis of the assembly and functioning of any kind of order, be it an authoritarian, democratic, peace or war setting, via a focus on underlying dynamics that are manifest in the interplay of social practices and cognitive dispositions. This is because it acknowledges that order and rules always persist. The rejection of methodological nationalism as a dominant framework for analysis opens up conceptual space for unbiased investigations of non-Western local societies, attempts to investigate these from within and possibly the study of Western societies “from below.” This can be accomplished by taking account of the cognitive factors of societies’ members and emic categories and the historical, socio-political and natural environments as part of wider contextual factors — in short, the application of a post-institutional perspective (Mehta 2007: 661).

Secondly, the study of social order requires contextualized operationalizing and the usage of complementing auxiliary concepts (life-world, patronage, moralities, *habitus* etc.). Thus, from a heuristic perspective, social order is not exclusionary, but integrates various existing approaches and concepts. It is not meant to replace these, just as the concept of social order is not meant to declare the epistemic viewpoint of methodological nationalism obsolete or to substitute “the state” as a framework for social organization. Rather, by merging and showing how existing concepts complement each other, the idea of social order enhances the analytical perspective, viz. by affecting the way of seeing and conceptualizing politics in a broader sense, i.e. by seeing more. In view of the fact that one strength of the social-order concept is its bridging of the rule and enforcement dimensions by taking explicit account of the influence of cognitive factors and that it helps trace political outcomes and status observations in underlying political processes, the social-order concept is not assumed to provide a theory in the narrow sense of cause-and-effect claims about social relations. The concept of social order should be considered a heuristic tool, which is close to realist theory’s understanding of theory as an “ordering framework.” Accordingly, theory does not order given observations or data, but negotiates their conceptualization (Sayer 2010: 53, 84).

For political scientists and classical sociologists, the social-order approach calls for a greater emphasis on qualitative, empirical and inductive inference — a perspective that does not exclude potentially crucial dimensions of order such as unwritten rules by design, i.e. via preconceived assumptions about object/variable relationships. Moreover, operating with a social-order lens allows researchers to reason about how a problem is being investigated. This can thus lend greater transparency regarding the epistemological underpinnings of the data-generation process and research findings. At the same time, “the political” — the content and meaning of politics in a broader sense — is newly conceptualized. In conventional political science, which — especially in the German tradition — distinguishes polity (form), politics (process) and policy (content) for the analysis of a separate political field of action delimited from an economic or social field, underlying notions of interest

enforcement and preference formation are usually taken as given and not linked to pluralism, resources and subsequent omnipresent struggles over these resources.

This article has emphasized that the diversity of interests, ideas, values and subsequent preferences in any society is interlinked with competition and conflicts about existing and available resources among its members. The mitigation of the conflict between this diversity on the one hand and the inter-subjective “social” character of humans on the other, who live in constant interaction with each other, is inherently political and involves the power-resource-dependent interplay of social practices and moralities, thus constituting politics. The content and meaning of politics and the power relations defining it are closely interwoven and multi-dimensionally entangled with social structure. This said, the social-order perspective renders the delimitation of a political sphere from an economic or social field meaningless and invalid.

The potential added value of the social-order perspective for an enhanced understanding of political outcomes via a focus on underlying processes has been illustrated with few examples, particularly in terms of local politics (Schetter 2012). The case studies summarized above have added significant pieces of the puzzle (micro-analyses as well as accounts of historical long-term processes) to explain state failure, prevailing stagnation in national “development” and democratization efforts, or, more generally, especially for the historic case, inertia prevailing over dynamic social change. As a conceptual lens, social order has something useful to add to several social-science disciplines, above all political science, (macro-) sociology, economics and history. As a rule, problem-oriented research from a social-order perspective involves methodological approaches and concepts from more than just one discipline; thus, it is an interdisciplinary approach. However, not only various disciplines can make use of the concept and potentially enhance their own enquiries by relying on it. The more significant value of social order is its scope to provide a communicative and conceptual space that allows the boundaries of disciplines to be crossed for a “rational organization of dissent” (Mollinga 2008). As a boundary concept, social order enables communication and ideally understanding — a common ground to advance research and knowledge further — between different social-science disciplines about the societal phenomenon in question. As previously mentioned, some examples of the latter with specific connotations in particular disciplines include local governance, “development,” economic performance, political outcomes (democratization/dictatorship, state failure, etc.) as well as modes of societal production and reproduction (Ger. *Vergesellschaftung*). Since each discipline is usually trapped in its own vocabulary and epistemological foundations, practitioners’ and policy-makers’ perception and approaches add another layer to such hermeneutical challenges. As a boundary concept, social order could eventually reach out further and enrich the non-academic field of practitioners and policy-makers. A change of vocabulary is less significant than the translation of the academic insights for decision-makers and implementers, however. The lessons

learned from a social-order perspective include long-term engagement in the support for social-change processes, for example, in the guise of democracy support or state- and institution-building or “development.” Similarly, bottom-up approaches or parallel bottom-up and top-down intervention designs that acknowledge the existence, potentiality and impact of unwritten rules promise to be constructive measures with which to deal with some of the challenges mentioned above.

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