

REVIEWS

International Networks in Times of Transition

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“Networks in Times of Transition. Toward a Transcultural History of International Organisations” conference by the “Asia and Europe in a Global Context” Cluster of Excellence, Heidelberg University, October 2010.

Introduction

To understand work and mechanisms of international networks, it is important to analyze and categorize international organizations as we know them today but also to thoroughly examine and interpret their development throughout history. A successful analysis of international organizations cannot afford to neglect the historical circumstances, because among other things, they always reflect on an organization's character. The conference “Networks in Times of Transition,” organized in October 2010 by the Cluster of Excellence “Asia and Europe in a Global Context” at Heidelberg University, presented a multinational approach to this challenging topic (Cornelia Knab: Conference: Networks in Times of Transition. Toward a Transcultural History of International Organizations, in: <http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/termine/id=14731> accessed 25 June 2011). Scholars, journalists, and archivists from Europe, Asia, and the U.S. presented and discussed their research on history and recent developments of international organizations, not only as separate entities but as parts of constantly transitioning networks. In several panels, the participants of the conference presented and controversially discussed their results on economic, political, and cultural aspects of collaboration in and of international organizations. The contributions of Japanese, Chinese, Indian, Australian, and Taiwanese researchers helped relativize an often criticized Western-centered perspective in research on international organizations and put a special focus on well-known Western networks within an Asian context. The conference also allowed gaining insights into structures and mechanisms of sometimes very different international networks. This article will present several conference contributions as examples of comprehensive approaches to research on the history of international organizations.

Historical Research on International Organizations

Historical research often requires an evaluation of documents and sources from archives throughout the world. This may rapidly become difficult for a single researcher unless he or she has unlimited access to financial resources, time, and knowledge of language. One step forward

in order to overcome such difficulties is bringing researchers together who work in different geographic areas and fields of expertise and thus accumulate this knowledge, as the conference aimed to do. Further possibilities are also offered by the Internet and the advancing digitalization of historical documents. In accordance, the conference dedicated its first panel to “Archival Materiality of International Organizations” and questions about conservation of international history and particularly the influence of times of war and crisis on document preservation. Jens Boel (UNESCO archives) explained some archives underwent a postwar move to other countries. For example, German archives were taken to the U.S. for scientific reasons after World War II. Decentralization of historical knowledge makes it harder for researchers who search for a global approach to their topic. A solution to this problem or the solution to the general problem of accessibility of archives would be digitalization of important documents. Digital archives from around the globe would facilitate and improve quality of historical research not only in the research area of international organization; in fact, every research area would benefit from online access to important documents. Beyond agreeing on the benefits of document digitalization, all contributors to this panel stressed the fact that without the selection and preservation of important documents, digitalization for historical research purposes will be difficult. Key sources of archival documents are the UNOG Library and Archives in Geneva, which contain, among other resources, core documents of international peacekeeping since 1919 and also give online access to a wide range of important UN documents. UNOG Archives Records Manager Sigrun Habermann Box emphasized the importance of UNOG sources not only for historians but also for daily political business within the UN. Yet another angle was introduced by Sacha Zala, director of diplomatic documents of Switzerland at the University of Berne, by presenting this database and its innovative approach to digitalization of Swiss and international source materials. He stated that while digitalizing diplomatic documents, personal files, or religious documents is important, oral documents, videos, and pictures should be included as well in online archives. Zala also explained that in order to “materialize the networks of international organizations” and to create thematic links between them, it is not only important to present documents online but also linking different databases to each other. In the panel’s final discussion it was agreed an on-going digitalization of archival documents in as many countries as possible would facilitate research about international organizations.

Structure and Location of International Organizations

One focal point of the conference was the revision of structural concepts of international organizations and the importance of their location. Toshiki Mogami (International Christian University, Tokyo) emphasized that while most international organizations were for a long time centralistically based in Europe or the U.S., modern international organizations could be established anywhere without being centralized. Craig N. Murphy (University of Massachusetts, Boston) spoke about “Global Governance: from Organizations to Networks or Not?” and focused on the changing nature of international organizations from the nineteenth century on. According to Murphy, the transformation of international organizations is partially triggered by the continually changing problems society faces. In addition, international organizations have been under a growing influence of nonEuropean employees. Combined, these factors

led to fewer hierarchical structures and emphasis of personal networks. Author and journalist, Prem Shankar Jha from India and Udo Simon also discussed structures of modern international networks and the changes they are going through. Jha showed how the post-Cold War power shift and efforts of U.S. and NATO to restore their power led among other things to the rise of international terrorist networks like Al Qaida, which is also a form of international network. Simon then gave a comprehensive overview over differences between Al Qaida or Islamist networks in general, and the “Umma,” as the global community of Islamic believers is called, which organizes itself into international networks, such as the Muslim Brotherhood. Some of these networks are partially government-controlled NGOs and have to be seen separately from terrorist networks like Al Qaida. The contributions about structure and locations of international networks also visualized the conceptual change international organizations underwent in the past decades: In their beginning, international networks were strongly connected to economic improvement or pacifistic goals, like the World Post Union or the League of Nations, but eventually they became more differentiated and more complicated to locate and categorize. Therefore, for understanding today’s international organizations, it should be a key approach to evaluate political circumstances and changes they have been confronted until now.

International Networking for National Diplomacy

One of the most consequential Asian conflicts in regard to effects on international cooperation might be the Manchurian incident. Keynote speaker Kenchiro Hirano (Japan Centre for Asian Historical Records, Tokyo) argued the Manchurian Crisis damaged the functioning of the League of Nations more than any other conflict it had ever been confronted with. According to Hirano, Japan’s withdrawal from the league was a decisive turning point toward the outbreak of World War II. In the context of the Manchurian Crisis, several contributions analyzed the role of China and Japan within international cooperation. Shin Kawashima (University of Tokyo) showed how a dispute over textbook content between Japan and China turned into a diplomatic incident between the two countries and was also taken up in the League of Nations after the outbreak of the Manchurian Crisis in 1931. This struggle over schoolbooks visualizes very well how cultural or scientific subjects were turned into issues of international policy. Following this example, Akashi Saikawa and Maya Okuda (University of Heidelberg) gave a summary of Japan’s and China’s role within the League of Nations international cultural cooperation; while both countries were emphasizing the significance of their own national culture and rebelled against Eurocentrism, they strictly avoided any official agreement with each other. Another example of using culture as propaganda, Atshshi Shibasaki (Komazawa University) presented the Kokusai Bunka Shinko Kai (International Cultural Relations Society) and analyzed its activities and international cultural relations in modern Japan (1943–54). Shibasaki demonstrated this relatively small but very active organization did not aim to establish international cultural cooperation for better mutual understanding but to promote a superior Japanese culture overseas. National culture became another battlefield of international conflicts. Bjarne Rogan (University of Oslo) addressed “Folklore and International Cooperation in the 1930s and the Case of CIAP and the League of Nations” and focused on the league’s

ambivalent attitude toward popular or folkloristic culture. He argued that controversies on folk art within the league were stirred by national rivalries and argued it was also seen as a tool for cultural hegemony. All contributions showed how international cultural cooperation has frequently been influenced by national interests. They also revealed the close entanglement of culture and political propaganda within international committees. One outcome of the conference was understanding the importance of China's and Japan's role within international organizations cannot be underestimated, but also instead of focusing only on Western-centered organizations or Asian networks, the geographical focus has to be extended, ideally spanning the globe. Furthermore, the discovery of the Janus-faced character of Asian cultural cooperation within international organizations encourages new approaches to other sections or concerning other members of international organizations.

Effects of International Cooperation on a National Level

How research on supposedly well-known organizations, such as the International Labor Organization (ILO), can lead to new insights when so far neglected topics are investigated or procedures of such organizations in different regions are compared was pointed out by discussant Klaas Dykmann (Roskilde University). The following paragraph will cover works presented at the conference, where such new approaches were made. Timothy D. Taylor (University of California, Los Angeles) presented an example of national and local identities that are influenced by developments on a global level. He argued in the context of fundamental processes of change, such as the ongoing digitalization and intensified use of the Internet, a high amount of cultural influences were transferred from one part of the world to another. While this could be seen as a chance to increase cultural diversity, these transfer processes may as well be interpreted as cultural imperialism. The role of UNESCO in this context, protecting "masterpieces of the intangible heritage of humanity," is important as well as problematic. Taylor demonstrated this ambiguity by example of the Guqin: This traditional Chinese music instrument suddenly became overpriced after it was declared "UNESCO masterpiece" in 2003. This episode shows protection by UNESCO can result in cultural commercialization. Being declared "UNESCO masterpiece" increases public awareness and communicates a certain cultural object or tradition is worthy of protection. As a consequence, they often experience increased recognition as well as a rise in monetary value. Until today, the discussion on what is worthy of protection as cultural heritage is highly politically and economically motivated. An example of a well-known Western organization, which has a completely different history in Asia, is the YMCA. Guoqi XU (University of Hong Kong) analyzed in "Networking through the Y" the international youth organization and its close connection to the search for a new national identity in China. He pointed out the YMCA helped establish modern sports in China and supported Chinese efforts to host the Olympic Games. However, according to Guoqi these activities were embedded in the Chinese struggle for a national identity and furthermore highlight the Chinese obsession for international recognition. Culture and sports aside, also core issues of international organizations such as economic development and international public health and labor standards with regard to Asia were discussed. Sunil S. Amrith (Birkbeck, University of London) talked about internationalization of public health in Asia,

which started during the interwar period and was an important topic of the Indian nationalist movement. Public labor and health standards played an important part in shaping ideas about healthcare in Southeast Asia. Amrith also explained how the basis of these transregional healthcare networks was created by organizations such as League of Nations or Rockefeller Foundation. More about the “Practices of Networking” was uncovered by Katja Naumann (University of Leipzig) whose research gave insight into the work of the international commission for a “Scientific and Cultural History of Mankind (SCHM) (1959–69).” Naumann pointed out that while it is often assumed impulses in developments of a global historiography came mainly from the U.S., the project of this international textbook commission, which had been influenced by scholars from all over the world, teaches us otherwise. This project is one of the few where scholars not only tried to take a global approach to knowledge but also where the scientific input was an international one. Tomoko Akami (Australian National University, Canberra) presented in “Pacific Science Networks in the Era of Empire and War (1920–39)” research on international scientific collaboration. Throughout the conference, Akami and others emphasized the impact of personal contacts networks’ activities on international organizations. While it needs yet to be determined which role these networks played, their examination could lead to a better understanding of the character of transnational cooperation.

Revising Research of International Organizations

In her final remarks, conference convener Madeleine Harren emphasized that in order to examine networks in times of transition, it would be necessary to “observe the globe from below,” by investigating the influence of common civil servants on workflows and character of international organizations. A potential tool for this research could be the League of Nations Search Engine (LONSEA), a new biographical online database, the launch of which was embedded into the conference. LONSEA is based upon the League of Nations Handbook of International Organizations and the League of Nations’ Personal Files of Employees. It is designed to facilitate research on personal networking within the context of international organizations and is a potential starting point to enter a new dimension in investigating ninety years of global governance (LONSEA) www.lonsea.de, accessed on 25 June 2011). Herren also summarized the factors that make it especially challenging to apprehend international organizations as a whole and to determine the reciprocal influence between them and the public sector. As a perspective, Herren suggested the role of civil society in relation to international organizations as well as the history of social border crossing movements beginning in the late 1960s and the debate on the state model versus transnational networks should be taken more into account in research on international organizations.

Highlighting the Asian participation in international organizations and networks, the conference also revealed how important it is for researchers who work on international organizations to exchange their findings within an international framework in order to gain an overall perspective on these global institutions and networks. The contributions presented throughout the conference were also a demonstration on the variety of research approaches on international organizations: Findings on scientific expert networks or the internationalization of public health, the power of economic cooperation or of religious and cultural collaboration,

proved international organizations often have a broader sphere of influence than just reacting to ongoing international entanglements by national governments. Therefore, the conference provided a good example of the benefits for research on international organizations or international networks when it is taken beyond merely embedding international organizations into a framework of international diplomacy. Only a thorough examination considering all aspects of international organizations, such as collaboration of international expert committees or investigation of international movements emerging from the civil society make a holistic understanding possible. Discovering under which circumstances international organizations have developed, their constitution, character, and impact on society is much easier to understand and to describe. Examination of an organization's entire life cycle implies an analysis of all important factors throughout its history; this approach goes beyond a mere description of its influence on the public sector and official governmental relations. Historical research can provide the methodology to discover these "hidden networks" by analyzing their rootedness in civil society, their cooperation within the public sector, and the importance of international cultural and economic collaboration.