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## INTRODUCTION



# Understanding transnational knowledge

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I

Looking back on nearly three decades of scientific thought on globalization (and knowledge) at least two shifts in argumentation can be identified. The scholarly debate started with a unifying “world view” of globalization, then turned the attention to the more or less sub- and transnational developments and, recently, has begun to address symbolic battles regarding regulative ideas of world society within a time of crisis and re-nationalization.

In the beginning of the 1990s, when the career of the buzz-word “globalization” started, it was mainly driven by the idea of what Appadurai called “modernity at large” (Appadurai, 1996). Globalization seemed to be the transformation of the whole globe into a mirror image of Western modernity. Scholars put forward the idea of a “global age” (Albrow, 1998) transcending the hitherto fragmented international order of political (Western and Eastern) influence spheres and bridging the knowledge division between so-called developed and under-developed world regions. This process was not at all conceived as a uni-directional process without contradictions. Critiques foresaw a phase of “cultural imperialism” based upon the capitalist infrastructure of the globalization mode (Tomlinson, 2001). But the thesis of imperialism shared the basic assumption of a globalized (capitalist) world order in the making.

In a second phase of the debate, the *production of (global) knowledge* was understood accordingly: as a collaborative effort to combine modern ideas with cultural difference adding up to what Geertz called the universe of discourse. Reasoning about globalization is itself part of the historical development which the concept tries to grasp and to elaborate. After 1989 the opening up of a single-world vision seemed to be a realistic possibility (at least from a Western point of view). The implosion of the Soviet Union, the diminishing of the “Iron Curtain” and the supposed end of a global confrontation of economic systems and military threats seemed to open up a historic window of opportunity for the spread of democracy, free market economy and ideas of global equality and human rights in accordance with the promise of preserving cultural diversity in the world. Within such a unifying world vision all sorts of problems (environment, poverty, war, migration) could be regarded as obstacles to be handled by world society as a single entity (the so-called world risk society; Beck, 1999).

## II

Soon, the globalization debate was overshadowed by new conflicts, economic turmoils, and a rise of nationalism in the course of the late 1990s and ever since. At the same time digital communication fostered transnational flows of information, conflicts enforced new migration movements and globally operating companies deepened the integration of their international production networks. Thus, on the one hand the speed of regional political integration slowed down, nation state building speeded up and the political capacity of global regulation declined. On the other hand informational, economic and personal movement transcending borders sharply increased. Social scientists reacted to this changing mode of global developments by shifting their attention from state and macro-actors to the micro-level of globalization and to civil society movements. The concept of “transnationalization” directly addressed this shift to dynamics beyond politics, especially in the fields of organizations, migration and regulative ideas (Pries, 2010). This shift included a more general change in the understanding of *transnational knowledge production and transfer*. For one the nexus of power and knowledge became prominent (again), e.g. in postcolonial theory or in the debate about the divide between the so-called Global North and the Global South.

Meanwhile a remarkable research body on traveling ideas (Czarniawska-Joerges & Sevón, 2005), traveling models (Behrends, Park, & Rottenburg, 2014) and the negotiation of global concepts in local contexts (Lachenmann & Dannecker, 2008; Merry, 2009) has emerged. According to these findings regulative ideas such as democracy, development or human rights undergo various changes when adapted in different regional and institutional settings. Claims of universality have been severely challenged as so-called global cultural models were traced back to Western elements, for example in science, ecology, business and education (see Krücken & Drori, 2009). In the field of global development consultants have been addressed as “knowledge brokers” and mediators engaged in the translation of traveling concepts. In the field of Multinational Corporations (MNCs) expatriate managers have been addressed as “boundary spanners” (Spiegel, Mense-Petermann, & Bredenkötter, 2018). Activists of social movements and social work professionals vernacularize, localize and appropriate global concepts such as human or women’s rights. Specifically in the field of social work, research has started to make visible the historical transnational background of global knowledge stocks (see Köngeter & Chambon, 2012; Spiegel, 2010).

In the strength of this large research body lies a weakness, too: The sole concentration on people, local places of interaction and the metaphors of transfer, exchange, power and translation within these arenas shows that research has, until lately, still been occupied with the model of the (abstract) global and the (concrete) local. It is true to say that every global process is also engaged in local action in every of its aspects. In order to be politically relevant, those local adaptations necessarily have to address their claims in relation to a transnational or even “universal” truth in order to make their claims trustworthy and convincing. Put the other way round, the global concepts are all but contested: In the vast majority of studies, they are in fact strengthened by the local claims of concretization. This could be phrased as a post-modern notion of universalism.

At least we can conclude that the “transnational” cannot be restricted to encounters which include *intentional* cross-border-cooperation. Quite the opposite: any given (local) social interaction or discussion can contain transnational issues as soon as it is somehow touched

by people, ideas or dynamics which link the encounter with transcending, i.e. translocal interactional settings or social structures (see Stichweh, 2000; Weiß, 2017).

### III

It is only in recent studies that the role of *knowledge in the globalization* debate is again put on trial: the existence of universally true knowledge is systematically challenged not by the need for local adaption but by claims of alternative and equally legitimate practices of action and knowing within or beyond local encounters. It is in this situation that implicit claims to knowledge have to be explicated in the course of crossing previously set boundaries. Explication makes claims to knowledge a subject of negotiation and a basis for coming to an agreement. Transnational knowledge in this sense denotes the destruction of implicitness in the dimension of (social) space – especially the national one.

The current situation is characterized by a multiplicity of perspectives within a single world society which is connected via unresolved problems, persisting (neo-colonial) relationships and new cleavages. At the same time new transnational actors enter the global stage promoting different versions of regulative ideas such as freedom, development or democracy. Symbolic battles have arisen around environmental issues, through human rights movements, by transnational networks of terrorism claiming religious knowledge as the basis of their action and through the rise of China not only as an economic and military power but also as a producer of ideas and visions of combining economy and politics: What can be observed is a global situation of divergence calling for new efforts to develop a theoretical and empirical understanding of knowledge and history in a transnational way (e.g. Comaroff & Comaroff, 2011; Frankopan, 2016).

The issue “Transnational Knowledge” takes up this call by asking what transforms knowledge claims into transnationally approved ones. Thinking of knowledge in transnational terms means that the notion of universality has lost its grip. Universal claims are contested and discussed but nevertheless the regulative ideas formerly understood as being universally true remain globally available. Making their local heritage explicit does not necessarily destroy knowledge claims altogether. So, to a certain extent the transnational is less than the universal but without a trans-local (and transnational) dimension of truth the mode of acceptance of knowledge would be reduced to sheer power or force. *We therefore have to ask how transnational knowledge emerges in the course of mutual communication and interaction.*

### IV

In order to grasp a deeper understanding of the development of transnational knowledge it is necessary to ask how transnational knowledge is produced, negotiated and henceforth approved within transnational arenas (understood in the way we spelled out above). The authors of the articles in this special issue therefore ask how processes of the approval of transnational knowledge must be conceptualized, identified and assessed with regard to their transcending of the *local level*.

In the first article of this journal *Angelika Pofel* identifies human rights as a global symbolic system. She puts together two lines of argumentation in order to show the transcending logics of the human rights discourse beyond its Western heritage. On the one hand there

can be no doubt about the regional genesis of the concept in Western societies. On the other hand human rights have become powerful symbolical tool as transnational knowledge. Poferl claims a universalistic source of the persuasiveness of this regulative idea: it is the human condition as being able to know of the suffering caused by the neglecting of basic rights. In the movement of global rights the historic semantic or symbolic system is covered by the universalistic condition of knowing of the suffering of others.

In her contribution to this issue *Bettina Mahlert* discusses the phenomenon of global development indicators. Global institutions use those indicators in order to compare, describe and advise nation states and regions. Those indicators, then, carry a normative understanding of development which is globally applied in order to measure modernization. Mahlert wants to know how far particularistic knowledge is built into this universalized techniques of the measurement of global improvement. She therefore distinguishes global or universal categories from residual frames that allow for the integration of the local or the specific into those indicators. Indeed, she can show that the discussion about transnational – as opposed to global – knowledge is already underway. But the extent to which this analytic discussion is mirrored in the indicators is still limited.

Focusing on matching practices within transnational Adoption *Britta Buschmann* asks how this powerful child placement can be understood analytically when it is accomplished by multiple actors across national borders. Based on empirical data she shows that the production of transnational knowledge becomes a power strategy in attempts to bridge contingencies, to manage risk and to legitimize action and decision-making for both sides. The analyzed matching processes therefore become a matter of knowing for professionals and new parents and can be understood as a highly contested practice of intermediating between the child's "best interest," parental desires, professional ethics, and structures established in the countries of origin.

*Benjamin Haas and Alexander Repenning* bring postcolonial theorizing into the debate about transnational knowledge. They focus on a German program of development aid called "weltwärts." Obviously development aid follows asymmetric lines of sourcing and programming in the Global North while adaption and implementation of those program and resources take place in the global South. The authors ask whether the weltwärts-program is able to transcend this fundamental asymmetry.

*Tao Liu* puts forward a historical view on the emergence of the transnational regulative idea of social insurance which emerged in the national context of Germany in the late nineteenth century. He shows how this idea was decontextualized through the course of history and thereby translated into a globally available institutional model. This argumentation underlines Poferl's analysis but on a different level of social organization: within state systems and their need for legitimation.

*Peter Schumacher and Maggie Leung* focus on another recent phenomenon mentioned above: the rise of China as a provider of alternative regulative ideas for social development in the so-called Global South. Although "Chinese Overseas Development Assistance" in the field of medical aid dates back to the 1970s it is now communicated as an alternative path to growth and development as compared to Western concepts. Schumacher and Leung analyze the relation of knowledge and mobility as the microstructure of Sino-African medical cooperation in Zambia. The specific Chinese approach to medical supply is often seen and described as effective. But the authors identify severe obstacles of transferring knowledge

in everyday practices which are very much in line with problems known from the Western path to development.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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