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Postscript to the Concept Paper of the Conflict Research Group

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Postscript of the Concept Paper of the Conflict Working Group

This postscript provides reflections on the concept paper by the members of the Conflict Working Group, taking into consideration the field research carried out during 2012 and 2013 and its implications for our initial ideas. The main aim of this postscript is to identify the key aspects of our work that have an impact on our basic understanding of conflict in the geographical study region of our network, both with respect to content as well as thematic fields and methodology.

1. Methodological reflections

The conflict follows us

In contrast with George Marcus' (Marcus 1995) formulation of a strategy for multi-sited research ("follow the conflict"), we made the observation that conflicts followed us. Due to the strong intensity of overlapping conflicts, which are typical for the geographical region covered by the research paradigm Crossroads Asia, the local setting of conflicts in the field had a strong impact on our research. Although the five research projects of the Conflict Group only indirectly aimed to investigate conflicts, our research activities encountered conflicts during the implementation stage. Several projects faced limitations on research opportunities by the concrete local conflict setting to different degrees. In one case ("Water and Social mobility – An Analysis of Hydroscares at the High Mountain Regions of Pakistan", Anna Grieser) we had to change the subject of research as well as the research site completely due to government interference and the volatile situation at the original location. In another case ("The Baloch Crossroads: The Conflicts of Tribes and States in a Globalised World", Just Boedeker) we had to stop our research activities immediately and leave the location within 24 hours due to the intervention of the German Federal Foreign Office. The work package on urban mobilization ("Sub-urban Movements: Social Inequality and Dynamics of Micro-Mobilization", Katja Mielke) opted for taking Kabul as a second in-depth field site instead of Karachi due to security considerations. In yet another case ("Language and Conflict", Lutz Rzehak) the decision to focus research on linguistic issues that affect the people in an emotional way – instead of talking directly about conflict – proved to be an effective adaptation. Such experiences led to an intensive discussion within the Working Group, but also in the entire Crossroads Asia network, about the political limitations of research opportunities. In addition, fruitful discussions arose as to how we should best present ourselves and our objectives during field research, as well as the degree to which our publications should be guided by self-censorship, in order not to endanger ourselves or others or jeopardize contacts at our research sites or even the possibility to visit again. The discussion concluded that we have to balance our self-understanding as independent researchers with security concerns and future interests.

Conflict – a term to hide?

As elaborated in this paper, our understanding of conflict was not limited to violent conflict, but sought to trace everyday practices of and perspectives on broader social conflicts. In encounters with interviewees with whom 'conflict' was discussed directly, the term was constantly associated in a negative way, thus pointing out how our academic understanding of conflict differed from that of

people in the field. In this regard, we found that attempts to deconstruct the concept are highly problematic.

During fieldwork carried out in diverse conflict settings, we conceptualized conflict implicitly or more explicitly from different viewpoints and on different scales. Thematic links between conflict and other research fields, especially development, but also migration/mobility became evident. Every work package in the Conflict Group could have been integrated into the other working groups. Particularly in relation to the theme of 'borderlands', or contested spaces, the two working packages "The Baloch Crossroads: The Conflicts of Tribes and the State in a Globalised World" and "Plural Affinities in Contested Borderlands" proved highly relevant to working packages such as D1 ("Development Potentials and Risks of Transformed Exchange Processes in the Border Area of Kazakhstan-Kyrgyzstan-Xinjiang", Henryk Alff) or D2 ("Resource Exploration, Migration and Developmental Dynamics along the North-South Corridor in the Iran-Afghanistan-Pakistan border region", Shahnaz R. Nadjmabadi) of the Development Group.

The idea of the state

Despite the openness of how the conflict theme was conceptualized, the 'idea of the state' as one of the main norm-setting institutions emerged as a crosscutting theme that was of high interest to all five working packages of the Conflict Group. Although the Crossroads Asia network takes the approach of focusing its analysis on people, leaving the state in the background, during our field research it became obvious that the state – including both the notion of the state as well as the direct interference of state agencies – matters both for the people as well as for the researchers. In local discourse, the 'state' is a constant reference point, even if people relate to the state in different and often contradicting ways. Imaginations of the state are often strongly linked with conflicts. Specific ideas of the state, however, varied a lot depending on the conflict context as well as from place to place. The research in urban Pakistan, for example, showed that local residents view the state both as a source of resource extraction, accessible via the 'right' networks and relationships, and as a force executing power/punishment in cases of deviance or non-obedience with rules, especially if relationships/networks are not cultivated effectively enough. In contrast, similar research in Kabul showed that rural dwellers have to rely more on their own initiatives, as a lack of capacities and finances on the part of the municipal administration either does not afford urban development or restricts measures to a few selected areas defined as belonging to planned schemes. Interestingly, notions of the 'state' as an abstract welfare provider seem to be much more prevalent in Kabul than in Lahore.

2. Thematic reflections

Figurations

Along with the entire network of Crossroads Asia, the Conflict Group made use of Norbert Elias' concept of figurations (Elias 2006), in particular to investigate and conceptualize the dynamics of mobility within conflict settings. The figurational approach turned out to be particularly fruitful in moving us beyond static understandings of societies, during field research as well as later data analysis. The figuration concept resonated with the findings of our research, during which we could observe how a minor issue can have major impacts on aspects not directly linked to an observed

process or interaction. For example, the enforcement of a political border can result in the amelioration of social positions for persons or groups with exclusive access to border facilities and can even change their social practices. By this means, the accentuation or relaxation of a political border can produce individual advancement or descent and change social structures and group boundaries. To that effect Just Boedeker observed how a Baloch group with exclusive access to the Afghan-Iranian border gained importance in cross-border trade and hence practiced endogamous marital alliances in order to maintain the exclusivity of this advantage (Alff, Boedeker, and Hornidge 2014). Moreover, the figurational approach fit nicely into the methodology of multi-sited ethnography, which was highly relevant for all working packages.

Borders and boundaries

As mentioned above, two of the working packages had an explicit focus on boundaries and border areas characterised by various degrees of conflict. A third one, although it did not focus explicitly on border issues, was situated within a sensitive border area. In this regard, the research undertaken in these areas has made us aware of the importance of location/place, a spatial aspect that had been largely underestimated at the beginning of the project. In order to study the process dimension of social practices by 'following' the people, we found that we could not 'cross' boundaries directly but had to travel through international airports to conduct field research in locations on opposite sides of borders. These experiences have made us aware of how sensitive border areas are in these territories, despite the relaxation of the border regimes in some cases and high border porosity in others. Sometimes border crossings are even completely restricted to foreigners. In any case, such border areas are under heightened surveillance by state agencies and this has a strong limiting impact on research. Thus, on one hand, border locations appear to be appropriate contexts to examine ongoing struggles for spatial transformations that have the potential to inflict changes in social figurations. On the other hand, however, research in border areas is often particularly difficult given researchers' limited access to both places and people.

While studying conflicts in different border locations, we became aware of the various conceptions of the state emerging at these specific sites. It became apparent how in the border contexts different historic and political circumstances produce different ways of the "permeation of stateness into everyday life" (Painter 2006: 753). In border areas, concepts of the state are very present, and therefore conflicts often revolved around questions such as: How do groups and individuals refer and relate to the state in the respective context? Is the state perceived as a colonial intrusion or a resource, as a threat or a protection? Do groups and individuals rebel against or adapt to what they perceive as institutions and representations of the states?

Mobilization

Social mobilization as underlying the mediation and negotiation of conflict but also as pre-condition of social change has been studied through tracing social practices of space making of low-income dwellers in urban settings in Lahore and Kabul (work package K4). Similarly to the direct discussion of conflict, the direct inquiry into practices of protest and contestation of other powers' legitimacy may be delicate, difficult or outright impossible. That is why the focus of the research was directed towards non-institutionalized mobilization without the interference of third parties like (I)NGOs. The research found that political and social mobilization as claim-making towards 'the state' was

inhibited by local dwellers' limited means and connections (which can be understood as resources) necessary for organizing both among themselves and with respect to the state. Mobilization for collective action as a precondition for transforming larger societal conflict issues (spatial marginalization, deprivation of property rights for low-income dwellers, statelessness/non-registration etc.) did not take place. Individual mobilization sought to generate resources for daily survival, but would not afford collective organizing, which would always require resources. One consequence of this situation is the relative social immobility of a large section of society, i.e. those who struggle on a daily level to make a living. However, the aspirations of low income-dwellers were regularly exploited by middlemen and local leaders, who usually play an ambivalent role. It was observed that due to their practices, which often involved criminal acts and served selfish goals of profit-making for themselves alone, new conflicts arose at community level over contested access to resources.

Language

The study of language and conflict was realized took a 'soft' approach, avoiding direct conversations about conflict. The main focus was on linguistic issues in the field of dialect studies, and research aimed to collect as much linguistic material as possible that would provide a deeper insight into those aspects of language that can be related to conflicts. The research made clear that language, while not the main cause of conflicts, expresses and transmits social and/or political conflicts and can be used to fuel existing conflicts. Today in Afghanistan the relationship between Dari and Pashto as the two official and main languages has critical potential for leading to political conflicts. Tendencies towards linguistic divergence between Dari and Pashto reflect ethnic dynamics and a strengthened ethnic consciousness of the groups involved. Politically intended linguistic divergence can be observed in the more formal registers of language both by speakers of Dari and by speakers of Pashto. The less formal registers of language are characterized by simultaneous processes of linguistic convergence in which Dari proved to be the more dominant language as compared to Pashto. The asymmetry of the linguistic setting inside Afghanistan is strengthened by intensified processes of language contact with the unequal language partners of Persian in Iran and Pashto in Pakistan. Mass migration of Afghans to these neighbouring countries caused a better command of the language varieties spoken there. Especially but not only female Afghan migrants learned to perceive the Persian language of Iran as being more fashionable and more modern as compared to Dari of Afghanistan. This shapes their linguistic behaviour after their return to Afghanistan and has given rise to new conflicts in the form of discrimination against Afghans who had migrated to Iran – on the basis of their linguistic behaviour only. The fact that language can fuel conflicts was also studied using the example of Internet publications of the so-called Taliban. Here a very schematic and morphologically-syntactically clichéd language is used to express political and ideological ideas. This language offers little room for individualized statements and it expresses the absence of any willingness to compromise.

Conclusion

During research in the field it became apparent in different ways that in contexts where violent and life-threatening conflicts prevail, it is problematic to explore conflict as an integrative or productive dimension of everyday life. In these contexts conflict and topics that are perceived as conflictive tend to be avoided because they have exclusively negative and forbidding connotations. Therefore research on conflict has to be conducted indirectly by focusing on thematic issues like certain figurations, borders and boundaries, mobilization or language, without primarily focusing on the conflictive aspects of these themes.

In addition, notions of the 'state' and their impacts on the livelihoods of the interlocutors and the fieldwork of the researchers turned out to be far more dominant than we expected them to be. Although the states where our research took place are often perceived as 'weak states', at least the *idea* "sustains its history as an arbiter of control, violence, order and organisation for those whose identities are being transformed by world forces" (Donnan and Wilson 1999: 2) even beyond its political borders.

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Information on the competence network Crossroads Asia

The competence network Crossroads Asia derives its name from the geographical area extending from eastern Iran to western China and from the Aral Sea to Northern India. The scholars collaborating in the competence network pursue a novel, 'post-area studies' approach, making thematic figurations and mobility the overarching perspectives of their research in Crossroads Asia. The concept of figuration implies that changes, minor or major, within one element of a constellation always affect the constellation as a whole; the network will test the value of this concept for understanding the complex structures framed by the cultural, political and socio-economic contexts in Crossroads Asia. Mobility is the other key concept for studying Crossroads Asia, which has always been a space of entangled interaction and communication, with human beings, ideas and commodities on the move across and beyond cultural, social and political borders. Figurations and mobility thus form the analytical frame of all three main thematic foci of our research: conflict, migration, and development.

- Five sub-projects in the working group **"Conflict"** will focus upon specific localized conflict-figurations and their relation to structural changes, from the interplay of global politics, the erosion of statehood, and globalization effects from above and below, to local struggles for autonomy, urban-rural dynamics and phenomena of diaspora. To gain a deeper understanding of the rationales and dynamics of conflict in Crossroads Asia, the sub-projects aim to analyze the logics of the genesis and transformation of conflictual figurations, and to investigate autochthonous conceptions of, and modes of dealing with conflicts. Particular attention will be given to the interdependence of conflict(s) and mobility.
- Six sub-projects in the working group **"Migration"** aim to map out trans-local figurations (networks and flows) within Crossroads Asia as well as figurations extending into both neighboring and distant areas (Arabian Peninsula, Russia, Europe, Australia, America). The main research question addresses how basic organizational and functional networks are structured, and how these structures affect what is on the move (people, commodities, ideas etc.). Conceptualizing empirical methods for mapping mobility and complex connectivities in trans-local spaces is a genuine desideratum. The aim of the working group is to refine the method of qualitative network analysis, which includes flows as well as their structures of operation, and to map mobility and explain mobility patterns.
- In the **"Development"**-working group four sub-projects are focusing on the effects of spatial movements (flows) and interwoven networks at the micro level with regard to processes of long-term social change, and with a special focus on locally perceived livelihood opportunities and their potential for implementation. The four sub-projects focus on two fundamental aspects: first, on structural changes in processes of transformation of patterns of allocation and distribution of resources, which are contested both at the household level and between individual and government agents; secondly, on forms of social mobility, which may create new opportunities, but may also cause the persistence of social inequality.

The competence network aims to mediate between the academic study of Crossroads Asia and efforts to meet the high demand for information on this area in politics and the public. Findings of the project will feed back into academic teaching, research outside the limits of the competence network, and public relations efforts. Further information on Crossroads Asia is available at www.crossroads-asia.de.

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