

THESIS

Provincializing and Localizing Core-Periphery Relations

Cilja Harders

The paper engages with core-periphery conceptions because they are a useful *Denkfigur* in a time of increasing global interconnectedness. I argue that the core-periphery metaphor is a useful one because it provides us with a relational tool of analysis and at the same time with a focus on asymmetric power relations. But it also has some serious limitations, such as a tendency to be over-deterministic and to be too global in scale. In order to address these limitations, I suggest rescaling Prebisch, Amin and Wallerstein's global conception of core and periphery to the local scale. I hold that we need to "provincialize" the core-periphery metaphor, to borrow Chakrabarty's (2000)

famous term, and to make the agency of local actors more relevant to our understanding of political dynamics in the MENA region. This paper sketches how "provincialized" and "localized" ways of using the core-periphery metaphor could look. This part builds on the main ideas Malika Bouziane, Anja Hoffmann and I developed in the introduction to our volume *Local Politics and Contemporary Transformations in the Arab World*, as well as my approach of a "state analysis from below."

Keywords: Core-Periphery; Agency-Structure; Politics Beyond the Center; Arab Transformations

The main reason for me to engage with core-periphery conceptions is the need to link issues of structure and agency in a time of increasing global interconnectedness. The core-periphery metaphor is a useful one because it provides us (1) with a relational tool of analysis and (2) with a focus on asymmetric power relations. However, this tool has some serious limitations, such as a tendency to be over-deterministic and to be too global in scale. In order to address these limitations, I suggest rescaling Prebisch, Amin and Wallerstein's global conception of core and periphery to the local scale. I hold that we need to "provincialize" the core periphery metaphor, to borrow Chakrabarty's (2000) famous term, and to make the agency of local actors more relevant to our understanding of political dynamics in the Maghreb, Mashriq and Gulf region. I offer my approach of a "state analysis from below" as a way of linking structure and agency on the national and local scale. In the last paragraphs of this essay, I will briefly sketch how "provincialized" and "localized" ways of using the core-periphery metaphor could look. This part builds on the main ideas Malika Bouziane, Anja Hoffmann and I developed in more detail in the introduction to our volume *Local Politics and Contemporary Transformations in the Arab World*.

Relationality and Asymmetries: Why the Core-Periphery Metaphor Is Useful

The idea of core-periphery relations as relations of economic and political domination was first used by the Economic Commission of Latin America and Raúl Prebisch in the 1950s to denote a specific, uneven division of labor in the world-economy between the North, the former imperial and colonial forces, and the South, the colonized peoples and economies. This idea was picked up, criticized and refined by different strands of dependency theories, which hold that this inequality is a necessary result and precondition of world capitalism. Amin, Wallerstein and others used it as an integral part of what Wallerstein later called world-systems analysis (*Modern World-System I, World-Systems Analysis*). Wallerstein argues that socioeconomic, political and historical developments should be analyzed in a relational way on a global rather than national level. He holds that so far in human history, there have been three kinds of systems: mini-systems, world-empires, and world-economies. The contemporary world-system is a capitalist world-economy. Building on Prebisch, Wallerstein uses core-periphery in the sense that it denotes periphery-like and core-like production processes rather than countries,

but it can be used as shorthand for states as well. Wallerstein proposes that “the key element distinguishing core-like from peripheral processes is the degree to which they are monopolized and therefore profitable” (*World-Systems Analysis* 93). Thus, as a result, periphery encompasses marginalized, less developed, economically less productive spaces or zones, which are dominated by a core, which is extracting surplus in an unequal exchange. His definition already hints to the two very productive aspects of his conceptualization: the relationality of the concept and the focus on power and domination. I will discuss these in light of some of the important insights of feminist theorizing of gender relations and power in order to assess the benefits and the limits of the concept.

(1) Relationality is a very useful *Denkfigur*. Relationality is not loaded normatively, as interactions of all types can be non-hierarchical as well as asymmetric and include material and non-material dimensions. For example, feminist reflections on concepts such as “femininity” or “masculinity” show that these can only be grasped in a relational manner. Our understanding of “man” is always linked to corresponding understandings of what “woman” is. This essential link is also inherent in the core-periphery metaphor.

The center is materially and symbolically constituted through the existence of a periphery and vice versa.

In feminist theorizing, such an understanding of relationality also implies that gender relations are not unidirectional relations of simple and violent domination. Rather, intersectional approaches in feminist theory as developed, for example, by Crenshaw, teach us that relations of power can take many different shapes along the lines of class, race, gender, disability or sexual orientation. An actor's positionality might change accordingly, depending on her different material and non-material resources in a given field, to borrow from Bourdieu (*Distinction*). Thus, gender relations are constituted both by structures and processes: people do gender and gender is being done. I suggest that the same can be said for core-periphery relations: they are as much determined by economic and political structures as they are shaped by individual and collective actors and their practices. This also implies that power is more than the capacity to dominate. It is rather a ubiquitous and productive force in the Foucauldian (*Discipline and Punish*) sense. It links discursive, symbolic and material spaces. Core-periphery relations in such a sense, then, are manifold, and their dynamics cannot just be understood as a function of

economic dominance. This in turn involves the need to make agency more relevant to the argument. In order to do so, I suggest analyzing the intersections of global structures and local actors on a national scale using “state analysis from below” rather than “world-systems analysis.”

(2) In the world-systems analysis, asymmetric power relations are at the heart of core-periphery relations on a global scale. They are part of the current capitalist world-economy, which emerged in the 16th century after a prolonged crisis of feudalism in Europe. Through these socioeconomic transformations, different countries of a core, a semi-periphery and a periphery emerged. The European core historically built its political and economic dominance on the exploitation of the periphery by extracting resources and raw material, thus creating surplus. This surplus is then turned into economies of high productivity creating wealth. In between these two lies the semi-periphery which includes economies and states which display some characteristics of the center and the periphery alike. “[T]hey trade core-like products to peripheral zones and peripheral products to core zones” (Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis* 97). Even though this conceptualization might sound overly simplistic and static,

it still captures structures of global inequality very well. A United Nations report from 2013 states:

In 2010, high-income countries—that accounted for only 16 per cent of the world’s population—were estimated to generate 55 per cent of global income. Low-income countries created just above one per cent of global income even though they contained 72 per cent of global population. An average gross domestic product (GDP) per capita of \$2,014 in sub-Saharan Africa in 2010 stood out against regional GDPs per capita of \$27,640 in the European Union and \$41,399 in North America. (United Nations 25)

But of course, such statements need inter-sectional differentiation, as I explained above. They need to be provincialized and discussed on more than one scale. Thus we get a more nuanced picture along the lines of gender, class, race, religion, and sexual orientation. The latest *World Development Report* shows that women represent 40 percent of the world’s labor force but hold just 1 percent of the world’s wealth (World Bank 46). Wage gaps persist: salaried women workers earn 62 cents for every US\$1 that men earn in Germany, 64 cents in India and about 80 cents in Mexico and Egypt. Women and girls are more likely to die

relative to men and boys in low and middle-income countries, with 3.9 million “missing” women and girls each year under the age of 60, the report says (xxi). In education, women now account for more than half of the world’s university students, and 60 countries have more young women than men in universities. Primary education disparities between boys and girls have closed in almost all nations. And in secondary education, girls now outnumber boys in 45 developing countries. But ethnicity combined with poverty can be a barrier: two-thirds of out-of-school girls around the world belong to ethnic minority groups (xx).

The political implications of these global structures of inequality are far reaching, according to Wallerstein (*Modern World-System I*). The economies of the core led to wealth and thus to the establishment of strong welfare states which tend to live in peace with each other. The states of the periphery, on the other hand, are weak, as they lack the resources to manage internal conflicts over access to these resources. The states of the semi-periphery function as a buffer zone between the core and the rest. They are mostly authoritarian states, as their economies are not fully productive and the state structure is weak. Wallerstein holds that this is not a static system, as states might rise and fall.

Thus, the core-periphery metaphor helps to situate states on the political and economic map of the world.

Still, I argue—much in line with earlier criticisms—that these generalizations need specification. A brief look at structuralist and functionalist arguments engaged with explaining the Arab uprisings will add some evidence to my claim. For example, all countries that have seen sustained mass mobilisation (Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, Libya, Syria) in 2011 are peripheral countries in view of world-systems theory. A closer look at the economic performance shows significant differences, though, such as between Yemen, Libya and Bahrain concerning (oil) wealth. In all states, poverty and social inequality can be found, Libya being the outlier. Nevertheless, a peripheral position, poverty and exclusion do not automatically induce protest, and vice versa. Thus, Yemen, Egypt and Tunisia have very little in common regarding basic indicators such as GDP, degree of literacy and overall productivity, but they could all shake free from their authoritarian rulers in 2011. Since then, these countries have embarked on quite different trajectories, which are of course influenced by structural factors. But I hold that these developments are linked to local dynamics of political contestation in

relation to structural factors such as regime type, resource endowment, or position as peripheral state. This in turn implies that actors and their actions, resources and beliefs are at the core of these local dynamics. Not the least, actions have an impact on actors and the ensuing processes of contestation, thus creating a degree of open-endedness and arbitrariness in the process itself.

The same is true for geopolitical dynamics, which are part and parcel of the core-periphery approach. Even though of course global power relations are heavily asymmetric, in the framework of globalization, they underwent some structural change well before the Arab uprisings and can thus not be used in order to explain large-scale political unrest in 2011. Power has shifted in three directions: upward, downward, and sideward, as Jessop noted already in 2000 (75). For the states of the Maghreb, Mashriq and Gulf as elsewhere, this means it shifted to transnational actors, non-state actors, and non-Arab actors already since 2003 due to the Iraq war (Harders and Bank 411-12). These processes have been exacerbated in the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings. The violent re-negotiation of the regional order includes the emergence of new social actors and transnational networks and the growing sideward shift of political power,

influence, and authority away from the Mediterranean coastline toward the Persian Gulf. These shifts have a significant impact on the violent conflicts in Libya, Syria, Iraq and Yemen. Still, the ensuing dynamics are quite varied: in Syria, any internationally negotiated solution is locked into a classic interstate cold-war scenario between Russia/China and Western powers. The intensive involvement of regional and international actors in sponsoring local armed groups with transnational links both to the West, (Gulf) Arab states, Turkey and Iran further complicates the picture and is at the same time indicative of sideward power shifts. The rise of a translocal non-state military actor such as ISIS since 2014 epitomizes these ongoing downward shifts. This is reinforced by the fact that ISIS is explicitly not interested in stabilizing the existing nation-states but rather in creating new sovereign structures with quite different shapes, thus challenging the model and practice of the conventional Middle Eastern nation-state. In Yemen in 2015, a Saudi-led alliance is imposing air strikes on the country in order to fight Shia Houthi militias. The Houthi militias in turn had been involved in violently challenging the regime long before 2011 and in the course of the conflict became increasingly transnationalized through the involvement of regional

actors such as Iran. Libya's disintegration, in contrast, ceased to attract much interest from regional and international state actors except European activities to control migration movements across the Mediterranean. Again, the effects of global power asymmetries, I hold, can only fully be grasped in *relation* to *local* agency and dynamics of contestation.

Alternative Perspectives on Core-Periphery Relations

What could such "provincialized" and "localized" ways of using the core-periphery metaphor look like? Provincialization implies more specificity in understanding how state-society relations play out on and among different scales such as the local, national, regional or international. Rather than assuming that these all work more or less in the same way in peripheral states, we need to theorize (1) the complex interplay between agency and structure more systematically and (2) link this to a deeper reflection on the "local." In order to theorize state-society relations, then, I use the analytical framework of a "state analysis from below," which I developed elsewhere in more detail (*Staatsanalyse*, "Bringing the Local"). In order to understand "the local" better, I build on the collaborative intellectual efforts Malika Bouziane, Anja Hoffmann and I made in

the framework of a research project in the SFB 700 "Governance in Areas of Limited Statehood" and the book *Local Politics and Contemporary Transformations in the Arab World: Governance Beyond the Centre* that was published as a result.

What is "state analysis from below"? It is an analytical framework which draws on critical, feminist, constructionist, and ethnographic works as sources of inspiration. It is embedded in the qualitative paradigm and builds on critical feminist methodologies. The approach is grounded in social theory, as it looks at the material and non-material dimensions of power relations and the ways these are both narrated and practiced. More specifically, in my 2002 book I built on Bourdieu's conceptualization of agency and structure in order to understand how actors use their different social, cultural, and symbolic capital while, for example, acting in the political field (Bourdieu, *Distinction, Über den Staat*). The approach thus contributes to the understanding of state-society relations in the broadest sense while looking at micro dynamics on the local scale, thus inscribing itself thoroughly in theory-oriented critical area studies. It offers a specific research perspective on "the state" as heuristic object of inquiry, which is understood by looking at local political dynamics, institutions and actors. The approach

of a "state analysis from below" focuses on political dynamics rather than (regime) stability.² It stresses the agency of actors, their resources, interests and belief systems within the given material and non-material structures, which enable or hinder certain actions. I thus focus on the dynamic and contradictory relations between "the state" and "society" rather than on the formal institutions and organizations, national arenas and political elites. Rather than assuming that "the state" or its agents deliver public services and contribute to the welfare, security, and inclusion of citizens, as a more mainstream political science definition of state and state functions would imply, I start from the local practices of an "everyday state" with limited hegemony. The state, then, is taken to be a translocal institution and a space of contestation and power struggles structured by a social contract. These struggles are embedded in specific historical, symbolic-discursive, social, institutional, cultural, and economic contexts. They constitute "politics," understood here in a broad sense, which become visible on the local scale and can empirically be operationalized as different types of participation. The main link between these structures and individual and/or collective agency in this approach is the concept of a "social contract," which defines the "rules of the

game." These rules are geared towards the creation of legitimacy for the current state of affairs while at the same time materially securing authoritarian rule. For example, the Egyptian social contract is authoritarian and informal in nature; citizens basically swap political rights for development and economic welfare (Harders, *Staatsanalyse*; Büttner and Büttner). The social contract is based on certain "logics of action," which structure the belief systems and expectations of different actors. Such logics of action in turn deeply influence the political structures, institutions and core beliefs of major actors, as Horst, Jünemann and Rothe argue in their "Logics of Action approach" (LoA). Empirically, it can be traced through, for example, looking at the belief systems of actors. In the Egyptian case, I argued that before (and even after) 2011 five logics of action dominated for elite actors: limited political liberalization, limited economic liberalization, Islamization, informalization and repression. The social contract of informality came under growing pressure in the last ten to fifteen years due to different developments such as neoliberal reforms, demographic change, media innovations (satellite-TV and the Internet) and changing gender relations. Thus, increasingly dynamic societies were confronted with

increasingly ossified authoritarian regime elites clinging to their power. Rapid social change was not met with political openings, leading to "transformation without transition." This in turn enabled people to increasingly challenge social contracts, leading to a protracted crisis of legitimacy in the Arab region. In this view, the wave of mass protest, which happened in 2011 in the Arab world, was basically triggered by a crisis of legitimacy, and the ensuing power struggles can be understood as the oftentimes violent attempts to re-negotiate the social contracts. At the same time, structures and actors interact and are co-determined: the dynamics of mass protest, revolution and their aftermath are the product of logics of action of contentious agents. Their actions have an impact on existing structures and vice versa. Such a relational perspective is explicit in the world-systems analysis but on a rather global scale. I hold that this can be and should be re-scaled to the local level, as the local is both the testing ground and a contested ground for new developments (Harders, "Bringing the Local"). What does this mean and how can the local be conceptualized both as a research perspective and object of inquiry? In the introduction to our volume *Contemporary Transformations in the Arab World: Gover-*

nance Beyond the Centre, Malika Bouziane, Anja Hoffmann and I argue that most prominently, the Arab uprisings of 2011

have demonstrated that "so-called peripheral" spaces and seemingly marginal actors have been vital in triggering major changes on the regime level; challenges to authoritarian governance are often first visible and viable in these local spaces of both resistance and acquiescence. It is on the local scale that power relations become tangible and abstract concepts such as "state" and "politics" observable. ("Analyzing Politics" 3)

Thus, looking at the micro-dynamics of struggles for power over material and non-material resources offers a more complex picture of authoritarian rule in the (semi-) periphery than much of the functionalist literature has it. These struggles are "simultaneously localized and globalized, connected to different scales and timeframes" (3). We avoid core-periphery language and instead speak about dynamics "beyond the center" in order to make space for the idea that there is more than one center and that these centers are the contested product of continuous social struggles. Picking up on the idea that there are structural and systematic differences between the cen-

ter and the rest, we also look at the discursive level of these differences.

While economic distance from the center might be measured by citizens' access to infrastructure and welfare, it is difficult to quantify people's self-perception of being socially or politically marginalized. Nevertheless, the spaces discussed here are characterized by a certain distance from the center with regard to power, practices of sovereignty, logics of violence, and allocation of resources. (6)

Spaces beyond the center, we hold, are often framed as being meaningless and inferior. These discourses mirror the existing sociopolitical order, and they are met by both resistance and subordination. As Bouziane shows in her work on the Jordanian town of Ma'an, its inhabitants interpret central politics as being dominated by the idea that the town needs control and punishment due to its unruly history. Morocco's mid-Atlas town of Luant is regarded as part of the so-called "useless Morocco," as Hoffmann shows in her work. This terminology is intentionally used by actors in the socioeconomic and political center of Morocco to demarcate scales and places of power/powerlessness. Such an epistemological move is highly productive in the sense that it creates the "useless Morocco" it presumes to describe,

and at the same time it is met by very concrete local opposition (Hoffmann). In the same vein, Lenner, in her study on Jordan, critically engages with the politics of constructing "poverty pockets," the dominant narrative used in Jordanian development politics. She shows how "poverty pockets" are defined and chosen in an assemblage of national and local actors' strategies imbued by international donors' priorities as much as by the government's need to include or appease specific communities. She links the global with the national scale without assuming patterns of domination but rather looking at the ways in which dominant international narratives are translated to the Jordanian context. Through the use of indicators, Lenner argues, poverty alleviation politics are "rendered technical." Thus, much energy is invested in debates about the "right" poverty line rather than addressing issues of inequality and distribution of wealth and access to resources.

These studies draw on critical debates inspired by the "cultural turn" in social sciences, which engages with the power and productivity of language and discourse. This has serious methodological implications. In her famous essay about "situated knowledges," feminist thinker Donna Haraway engages with the methodological dilemmas which emerge from femi-

nists' and radical constructionists' criticism of conventional, positivist science. She criticizes the idea of a neutral, godlike scientific gaze on the world from nowhere and argues for "the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity" (589) as a basic prerequisite to create "situated knowledges" rather than seemingly "objective" science.

Taking these methodological reflections as a starting point, we also struggled with the politics of naming. By using the term "beyond the center" we both link up to and disconnect from the center-periphery metaphor. Why? Thinking in dichotomic categories tends to be reductionist, as it presupposes that there are only two sides or spaces to look at. We hold that there is more beyond the core than just periphery in the classic sense, and in this essay I have presented a complex matrix of scales and actors which cannot be caught in a simple dichotomy. Thus, in our book we speak about the so-called "periphery" in order to leave space for the emergence of perceptions which go beyond a simple relationship of domination. By not naming the periphery as such, we stress the role of agency in politics as we understand it. This allows us to better account for local narratives and perceptions of the multiple

Cilja Harders

is the director of the Center for Middle Eastern and North African Politics at the Otto-Suhr Institute for Political Sciences at Freie Universität Berlin. She has extensive research experience in the Middle East since 1992, with a focus on Egypt. She has published on transformations and politics “from below,” local politics, Arab-European relations, as well as gender relations. She directs the DAAD-funded project “Challenges and Transformations in the Wake of the Arab Spring” with Cairo University as well as a DFG-funded project on politics and emotions. She co-edited the book *Local Politics and Contemporary Transformations in the Arab World* with Palgrave in 2013.

power dynamics embedded in center-periphery relations. But, by way of auto-critique of our conceptualization, I would like to hint at the limits of this suggestion. If what is “beyond the center” is not named, we repeat an exclusionary epistemological gesture of withholding even a name or a signifier for the periphery. Only the center is named as “center;” the periphery is just delineated to be everything “beyond the center.” Such a move reifies the centrality and power of the center on the discursive level. So, both options come with limitations. The core-periphery concept is heavily loaded in a deterministic and economic way, but the idea of just naming the center as such and leaving the rest “beyond” is just as problematic. The same is true of the “from below” metaphor I have been using. Even though it stresses the periphery rather than the center in directing our gaze to “below,” it also reproduces the vertical hierarchies of being on top or being below. The metaphor implies that messy realities can be sorted in such an orderly way. This is, as I already alluded to, not just a scientific illusion but a powerful and highly productive gesture, which serves to render this messiness understandable and thus controllable. Not the least, it also inscribes itself in an emancipatory intellectual trajectory—

such as a feminist or Marxist one—which has also produced highly problematic and romanticized accounts of “giving voice to the suppressed” or being in possession of a not-so-false consciousness. As Donna Haraway puts it:

So, I think my problem, and “our” problem, is how to have simultaneously an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognizing our own “semiotic technologies” for making meaning, and a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a “real” world, one that can be partially shared and that is friendly to earth-wide projects of finite freedom, adequate material abundance, modest meaning in suffering, and limited silliness. (579)

Her answer to this problem is “situated knowledges” and a different type of science. She concludes:

Science becomes the paradigmatic model, not of closure, but of that which is contestable and contested. Science becomes the myth, not of what escapes human agency and responsibility in a realm above the fray, but, rather, of accountability and responsibility for translations and solidarities linking the cacophonous visions and visionary voices that characterize the

knowledges of the subjugated. (590) It is in this sense that I proposed to use the core-periphery metaphor while building on research which has been produced by the team of the Center for Politics in the Maghreb, Mashriq and Gulf at FU Berlin in recent years (Center for Middle Eastern and North African Politics). In light of these conceptual debates and empirical findings, I argued that in order to strengthen the analytical use of the core-periphery concept, it needs to be provincialized and localized. This can be done by, for example, using my approach of a “state analysis from below” or by looking at “governance beyond the center.” This enables us to imbue our analysis of core-periphery relations with a better understanding of the role of agency, resistance and the multi-scalar power struggles which link the many different cores with the quite variegated peripheries.

Notes

1 I use different terms such as Arab world, Middle East and North Africa, Maghreb, Mashriq and Gulf in order to demarcate "the region," which is both a political construct and a political reality. As all terms carry serious limitations, e.g. with regard to their colonial roots and geopolitical implications, I use them intermittently.

2 The following paragraph is based on Harders, "Bringing the Local Back In."

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