Civilising Missions, International Relations, and Foreign Policies in the 20th Century

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In contrast to the French notion of a „mission civilisatrice“, the corresponding English and German concepts of „Civilising Missions“ and „Zivilisierungsmissionen“ still lack substantial research. In response, the conference „Civilising Missions, International Relations, and Foreign Policies in the 20th Century“ provided a forum to discuss a wide array of civilisational projects and to broaden, challenge and frame conceptual and theoretical approaches from the disciplinary angles of historical and social sciences. Organized by Boris Barth (University of Konstanz) and Rolf Hobson (Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies (IFS), Oslo) and embedded within the work of the DFG-financed Leibniz Programme „Global Processes“ at the University of Konstanz, this conference has been a follow-up event to the 2003 workshop on „Zivilisierungsmissionen. Imperiale Weltverbesserung seit dem 18. Jahrhundert“.

As normatively informed programmes of improvement, civilising missions are commonly located at the core of imperial ideology. They often derive from the civiliser’s own sense of superiority and the self-proclaimed responsibility to improve other cultures. Civilising missions also had a considerable impact on foreign policy and international relations. Moreover they are not only a phenomenon of 19th and early 20th century imperialism. As already noted in the review of „Zivilisierungsmissionen“ by Birthe Kundrus, contemporary forms of civilising missions often appear under the auspices of the United Nations in the guise of crisis management. Foreign interventions such as NATO’s engagement in the Balkan region and the war in Iraq can also be seen in this context. From Jürgen Osterhammel’s (Konstanz) introductionary remarks to Rolf Hobson’s (Oslo) talk on the US-American neo-conservative movement and Frank Ninkovich’s (New York) review of the changing patterns of civilising missions in US foreign relations throughout the 20th century, the talks given during this conference also emphasised recent forms of civilising missions.

The conference was split into seemingly loosely related sections on Peace and Democratization, the Scandinavian States and International Law, Labour and Economy, the United States, and the Imperial Dimensions. Nonetheless, the talks and the subsequent discussions had a clear focus on three key aspects of civilising missions: the set of norms and values (1), the institutional means and contexts (2) as well as the diversity of actors (3).

(1) Civilising missions start from the assumption that some norms and values are universal. They thus implied a sense of „deficiencies“ and „backwardness“ in other cultures and actively propagated the need for societies to progress and develop towards a certain set of norms and values that exists independently of space and time. In this context, reflecting on concepts such as democracy and peace is essential for both understanding how and why a particular political-economic regime conceives itself as a civilisation as well as why it feels justified in making others conform to this image.

JOST DÜLFFER’s (Köln) opening presentation critically questioned the interrelatedness between democracy and peace in the broad context of Democratic Peace Theory – from Kant’s idea of a perpetual peace, to Wilsonianism and the Atlantic Charter. He not only discussed Levy’s famous quotation that democracies do not wage war against each other, but also emphasised the normative core of Democratic Peace Theory – the claim

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that in the long term democracy and peace will prevail worldwide. He powerfully highlighted the complex entanglements between peace and democracy and his arguments went well beyond the theoretical context of Democratic Peace Theory.

BORIS BARTH (Konstanz) focused on the democratization of Europe as a civilising mission during the inter-war years as well as on the failure of this project in the 1930s. In this context, he reflected on the relation of different political regimes – empires, monarchies and nation-states – to the concept of democracy as well as on the consequences of democratizing tendencies for political regimes: the mobilisation of masses and the demand for rights.

Related to these issues, KAREN GRAM SKJOLDAGER (Aarhus) highlighted how disarmament emerged as the dominant value of civilising efforts of the Nordic states. KARL ERIK HAUG (Trondheim) focused on Norway’s confirming attitude towards the role of arbitration and international law for the resolution of conflict and war among states. As Norway had a particular geographical and diplomatic position perfectly suited for solutions based on international law, Karl Erik Haug criticized that Norway and the other Scandinavian states overlooked the situation of less fortunately placed states.

(2) Although it has been made clear that civilising missions were always entangled with the state and/or the empire, they are only two potentially powerful actors among others. As the state and the empire are not a priori fixed analytical entities, it is important to highlight alternative forms of spatial configurations and perspectives beyond the traditional understanding of distinct national and imperial territories. The talks addressed a broad array of institutional means by which civilising missions promoted and tried to strengthen norms and values: For instance, ANDREAS ECKERT (Berlin) emphasised the work of the International Labour Organization and labour standards as a civilizing effort. STEPHAN SCHEUZGER (Bern) underlined the role of human rights and justice in the context of Truth Commissions.

FRANK NINKOVICH (New York) challenged the empire-civilising mission nexus by pointing to the difference between civilising missions in the European or colonial context. His talk proposed to see the Cold War as a historical struggle over which way of life should be the dominant form of civilisation. From this perspective, the traditional conceptual approach to civilising missions takes a very different meaning. BLANKA PIETROW-ENNKER (Konstanz) highlighted how the discursive reconstruction of identity as a truly national reform project within the early second republic of Poland has been embedded in a wider political and territorial context. HARALD FISCHER-TINÉ (Zürich), by focusing on the history of the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) and rural reconstruction schemes in South Asia during the first half of the 20th century, revealed the crucial role of local knowledge, practices and traditions. In this context, he not only pointed to the tension-laden and complex relation between local and global spheres of action, but he also discussed alternative spatial approaches to South Asia.

(3) Related to these observations, the participants constantly referred to the great variety of actors of civilising missions beyond the focus on states and empires. In the context of a mutual reflection on „Who is civilising?” and „Who is civilised?”, it has been made clear that there always exist multiple senses and multifaceted shapes of hierarchy between the civilisers and the civilised.

As a powerful example, ESTHER MÖLLER’s (Mainz) talk on the complex entanglements of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in the 1950s and 1960s revealed how a civilising mission has become questioned both from Western and Arab sides. She also made clear that in the violent conflicts of decolonisation in the Arab world, both movements were faced with the task of remaining neutral between the European side and the Arab opponents that criticised the European violation of humanitarian law. Stephan Scheuzger provided another example by presenting the case of Truth Commissions and the role of highly cosmopolitan expert networks. Karen Gram Skjoldager highlighted the crucial role of individual ties and networks. In a similar manner, Harald Fischer-Tiné argued that our attention should be directed away from the coloni-
al state to the individual. Yet, he also made clear that attention needs to be paid to the contradictory and complex characters and actions of actors: D. Spencer Hatch – the hero of Fischer-Tiné’s presentation – has been both, an imperial accomplice and pioneer of scientific village development. VALESKA HUBER (London) focused on the audience of civilising missions emphasising the role of communication and language in the British Empire. Her three empirical examples – Basic English, the Institute of African Language and Cultures and the literacy campaigns and the work of missionaries – highlighted the crucial role of non-governmental institutions and social scientists in the context of civilising missions.

The papers presented encompassed a remarkably wide geographical scope and addressed a broad array of subjects and alternative conceptual approaches. Although civilising missions are often associated with the Great Powers and the 19th and early 20th century, the majority of the talks went well beyond this argument: They highlighted how initiatives throughout the 20th century also originated in smaller states and to what extent non-governmental institutions and actors from the educated milieus and elites in the metropolitan society mattered for civilisational projects. Unfortunately, no presentation explicitly covered the historical example of the Soviet Union or treated the relation between Communism and civilising missions.

Conference Overview:

Jürgen Osterhammel (Konstanz), Words of Welcome

Boris Barth (Konstanz) / Rolf Hobson (Oslo), Introduction

Section 1: Peace and Democratisation
Chair: Jürgen Osterhammel

Jost Dülffer (Köln), The Democratic Peace Controversy

Boris Barth (Konstanz), Democratisation during the Interwar Years

Stephan Schuezger (Bern), Transitional Justice and Truth Commissions

Section 2: Scandinavian States and International Law in the Interwar Years

Chair: Rolf Hobson

Karen Gram Skjoldager (Aarhus), Lilliputians for Peace. Scandinavia and the Disarmament Question in the Interwar Years

Karl Erik Haug (Trondheim), Civilising through Example – or Neutrality when Things Get Rough

Section 3: Labour and the Economic Dimension
Chair: Martin Rempe

Andreas Eckert (Berlin), Civilising Labour on a Global Scale. The Civilising Mission of the ILO in the Twentieth Century

Section 4: Case Study: USA
Chair: Andreas Eckert


Rolf Hobson (Oslo), American Nationalism and Global Democracy. How Neo-Cons Tried to Speed up the Inevitable

Section 5: The Imperial Dimension I
Chair: Moritz von Brescius

Valeska Huber (London), Language and the Civilising Mission at the End of Empire

Harald Fischer-Tiné (Zürich), „Uplifting“ Indians. A Global Story

Section 6: The Imperial Dimension II
Chair: Valeska Huber

Esther Möller (Mainz), Questioning the Civilising Mission: The Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and the Arab World

Bianka Pietrow-Ennker (Konstanz), Concepts of Space and Foreign Policy in the Early Second Republic of Poland