Global Intellectual History beyond Eurocentric Lenses: Connected Political Vocabularies across South and Southeast Asia, ca. 1800-2018

Veranstalter: Milinda Banerjee, Japan Zentrum, Fakultät für Kulturwissenschaften, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Munich; David Malitz, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok
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Bericht von: Philipp Sperner, DFG-Research Training Group „Globalisation and Literature", Ludwig-Maximmilians-Universität, Munich

The global has increasingly become the subject as well as the defining frame of reference for substantial parts of research in the humanities in general and historiography in particular. In many cases, the alleged 'globality' of the analysed phenomena is understood as resulting from the global interconnectedness of modernity, as a time for which the myth of isolated histories and segregated traditions can most definitely no longer be upheld. Such an interlinking of modernity and globality has contributed to a specific kind of Eurocentric understanding of global phenomena, which are not studied in an exclusively European context, but still analysed as necessarily originating in Europe and spreading from there. Rather than denoting an actual *global* occurrence, the adjective 'global' (especially when used to refer to modern phenomena) thus has seemingly come to characterise a movement or trajectory that takes Europe as its irreducible starting point.

The field of Global Intellectual History has not been an exception in this regard so far and it is here where the round table on connected intellectual histories of South and Southeast Asia attempted to intervene. By focusing on the connected political vocabularies across South and Southeast Asia, the participants were actively engaged in creating a space for Global Intellectual History beyond Eurocentric lenses. While merely drawing the attention to the ongoing pervasive Eurocentric approach to histories of 'global' or transregional phenomena would certainly have been a very commendable effort in its own right already,

the round table succeeded in going much further by identifying and developing possible methods or approaches that facilitate such a decentralisation of globality as merely a constant repetition of the story of European origins.

One approach that ran like a common thread through all three presentations and proved to be particularly fruitful was the focus on terms and vocabulary instead of concepts and ideas. Turning the well-established procedure of *Ideengeschichte* (or history of ideas) on its head (or rather from its head to its feet) – and thus focusing on how linguistically related terms acquired differing connotations and varying levels of significance throughout diverse regions and periods instead of just analysing an allegedly tightly connected set of ideas by tracing their expressions and representations through changing terminologies – helps to avoid hasty assumptions of comparability and similarity.

This was amply demonstrated in the talk by DAVID MALITZ (Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok), who followed the history of the term *sukha* (happiness, calmness or a feeling of being at ease) from contemporary Thai politics back to its foundations in Theravada Buddhism. Malitz argued that efforts to understand the history of politics in Thailand, particularly in the country's recent past, cannot but fail when the significance of the term *sukha* is not adequately considered. According to Theravada Buddhist ideals and their historic interpretations in Thailand, happiness of all is regarded as the primary aim of good governance. In order to be able to deliver and guarantee *sukha* to the people, however, the rulers themselves must be free from moral corruption. When applied to contemporary politics, the notion of ideal kingship and governance as primarily providing for the continued happiness of the people can effectively function as a justification of a prevailing top-down approach in Thai politics, emphasizing the importance of the personal moral / ethical character of political leaders over the accountability of their actions.

Seen from a Western perspective, the perceived dissonance between the political leader's purported interest in the happiness of the people and the installation of a de facto

military dictatorship can only be explained as a cynical justification of an undemocratic regime, reminiscent of an Orwellian dystopia. As the talk by David Malitz has shown, however, it is much more insightful to analyse contemporary Thai politics against the background of a centuries-long engagement with notions of just rule rooted in the Buddhist-inflected Sanskrit terminology of *sukha* and personal corruption.

One of the most prolific Sanskritic political concepts across South and Southeast Asia has been the notion of *dharma*. And it is this term, along with Sanskrit-origin terms for the human being or humanity, which provided the starting point for the presentation of MILINDA BANERJEE (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich), who looked into four moments of transregional contact across the Indian Ocean between the 17th and the 21st century. Banerjee argued that political dialogues and conflicts take shape through, and are contingent upon, shared terminologies (which are in this case based in shared Sanskrit-origin vocabularies). While not claiming that notions such as *dharma* and the concept of a *dharmaraja* or 'just ruler', or terms for humanity (such as *nara*, *manava*, *manushya*) and human / animal distinction, were brought about through transregional and interreligious contact and exchange, the presentation emphasized that they were nonetheless significantly shaped by and through such encounters. By impressively weaving a web of shared connections across time and space and thus bringing the devastating current situations of the Rohingya in Myanmar into a relationship with the poet Rabindranath Tagore's travels to Thailand and Indonesia in 1927, the culturally diverse Arakan court of the 17th century, and experiences of colonial violence and anticolonial resistance in India and Burma during the Second World War, Banerjee hinted at the outlines of a cosmopolitanism that has a long regional history and is not solely framed in European terms.

The subsequent discussion, led by the general respondents JOWITA KRAMER and PAULUS KAUFMANN (both Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich), focused on the relationship between transregional exchange and the development of new terminologies and concepts. One of the most interesting and possibly furthest reaching points raised in this regard was the thesis, advocated by Banerjee, that terms for 'humanity' and other potentially egalitarian concepts were only developed when frequent exchanges between people from diverse regions and cultural backgrounds prompted the production of more inclusive and universal terminologies, as was the case, for example, in the early modern and modern Indian Ocean world. This emphasized the point once more that such concepts had multi-sited genealogies and do not have exclusively European origins.

The relationship between language and innovation was also at the centre of the paper by SIMON CUBELIC (Heidelberg University). By drawing on the concepts of diglossia, hyperglossia and heteroglossia following Mikhail Bakhtin and Sheldon Pollock, Cubelic showed how Nepali and Sanskrit were both used simultaneously within the political sphere of 19th-century Nepal and that the country can thus be seen as a latecomer in terms of the development of what Pollock has called the 'vernacular cosmopolis', namely the turn from Sanskrit to the vernacular languages that were, however, very much rooted in the 'cosmopolitan' characteristics of Sanskrit as their primary model and basis. In looking at different texts and historical documents from the early 19th century, Cubelic pointed out that while Sanskrit was the language of choice for more universalistic discourses and soteriological invocations, Nepali was usually used for more concrete and specific discussions or declarations. This became especially clear in regard to texts that talked about specific political, cultural and technical innovations that were initiated through transregional contact and exchange. Nepali, Cublic argued, thus allowed for the development of an extensive xenology. Since this comprehensive engagement with specific others was closely connected to the development of new notions of knowledge and innovation, it seems to have been difficult if not impossible to conduct such kind of xenology in Sanskrit, which was so closely tied to its very own traditions of knowledge and learn-

ing.

By offering a broad range of perspectives and possible research approaches, the round table succeeded in significantly broadening and opening the field of Global Intellectual History and in providing a much-needed alternative to the Eurocentric framework of globality. Furthermore, the talks and discussions have made it abundantly clear that thorough research into the history of transregional exchange, that led to the development of a shared political vocabulary in the region, is absolutely vital for a better understanding of the intellectual history of South and Southeast Asia in general and political ideas in particular. What has also become clear, however, is that these are but the very first steps towards a new understanding of the notion of globality, which is more attuned to its particular and varying characteristics and thus simultaneously also more inclusive and universal. It can only be hoped, therefore, that the round table contributes to a lasting change of the still primarily Eurocentric perspective and will inspire similar endeavours in connected fields.

Conference Overview:

Milinda Banerjee (Munich): Tracing Two Political Concepts across the Indian Ocean: Humanity and Rule of Dharma

Simon Cubelic (Heidelberg): Diglossia, Hyperglossia or Heteroglossia? Sanskrit and the Political Languages of 19th-century Nepal

David Malitz (Bangkok): The Pursuit of *Sukha*: The Theravada Foundations of the Thai Political Discourse

Respondents: Jowita Kramer and Paulus Kaufmann (both Munich)

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