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"Search Movements"

Re-Thinking Multilateralism between Politics and Science

The joint search for new possibilities of multilateral cooperation sees both politics and political science facing the same challenge: a reduction of global political complexity that will continue to allow for a clear outlook and thus for policy-making potential. A key scholarly tool in this dialogue is the analysis of the established logical, cultural, and linguistic presuppositions of concepts of multilateralism and the related question of how these may constrain its re-thinking.

The established diagnosis of 'a world out of bounds' now explicitly includes multilateralism as a core organizing principle of world politics. Whether understood as an endgame or as an opportunity, a significant part of the efforts to preserve multilateralism is being accomplished via a review-cum-white paper process that has literally been established as a genre in German foreign and security policy since 2014. Here, the German government once again presents itself as "reliant on the many proven national and international experts" ([Annen](#)) in order to pursue the question of how multilateralism can be further developed and thus continue to be thought of as a practice that creates a stable global order ([Merkel](#)).

In general, the desired joint efforts of politics and political science are observed along with the interface of 'theory and practice'. The question arises as to what a political science as a social science can contribute in terms of productive insights to the aforementioned search movement. Fortunately, one has come to realize that the distinction between theory and practice no longer needs to be thought of as the exclusive dividing line of science and politics.

Not only is it obvious that countless historical ideas have been introduced into political practice via theory – whether it was the problem of sovereignty (Bodin), the contract-theoretical foundation of the political community (Rousseau), or the function of the state (Hobbes) – but all these approaches provided, if not an exact

blueprint for the construction of political structures, at least a vocabulary with which these could be described and thus rationalized.

However, more recently, it was rather the political insight and admonition not to "give in to the temptation to draw in black and white where the gray shades of uncertainty prevail, or where there is room for competing truths in the same reality" (Steinmeier) that clearly highlighted that foreign policy and science share a common referential problem: the complexity of the modern world (and thus politics) and the challenge of dealing with it adequately.

Complexity here refers to the fact that the world (and thus politics) always offers more possibilities for observation than can be taken into account and realized. Complexity must therefore be reduced, so to speak, in order to obtain a picture of the situation and based on which further action can be considered. Due to the 'natural' cognitive limitations of individuals and organizations, the observation of foreign policy in both domains therefore always has to follow a specific selective pattern that has to cover some aspects and disregard others.

At least at this point, politics and science are thus released from their supposed opposition: both practically carry out the handling of complexity by theoretically designing the most productive observational perspective on the domain of foreign policy, which is 'contaminated' by intransparency. Under these circumstances, theory and practice do not only 'fall into one', so to speak – the common referential problem rather enables politics and science to learn from and with each other. What the scientific observation of foreign policy can reveal to its counterpart are latent self-limitations.

In the sense of the aforementioned relationship between the complexity of world politics and its necessary reduction, these latent self-limitations show up in the form of unreflected premises or 'false presuppositions' (Steinmeier). These stand at key points in the observation process, reducing complexity to an unproductive level, and in turn preventing a greater measure of world political complexity from being captured. Because of their logical, contentual, or other blind spots, these premises thus block productive observation of (here: multilateral) foreign policy in its many dimensions.

A reflection on how multilateralism can be further developed and cognized today must therefore also be concerned precisely with tracking down such premises, replacing them or rebuilding them in such a way that they actually open up new spaces of possibility for policy planning and design. Thus, the task is not only to answer the obvious questions, but also to always question the supposedly obvious.

A tried and tested and thus productive tool which political science can make available to this process of reflection goes by the term 'social structure and semantics' – which is, of course, certainly an unwieldy one for foreign policy at first glance. The irritation, however, should not last long, especially since the preceding lines already contain a first hint at the correlation the terms try to capture.

The recourse to the tradition of political theory – represented above by names such as Bodin, Rousseau, or Hobbes – quickly points the social-science oriented view to the central insight of the conceptual pair of 'social structure and semantics': there is obviously a relationship between developing organizational structures ('social structure') and their descriptions that provide them with meaning ('semantics'). Example: where medieval structures of sovereignty changed ('social structure'), an elaborated understanding of sovereignty ('semantics') was needed.

This also resonates with the current search movements that surround the concept of multilateralism: global structures of order are radically changing ('social structure'); in order to be able to describe them, a different meaningful description of global political order is needed ('semantics'). Social and hence political problems are thus always dealt with in the interplay of social structures and their semantic descriptions.

All this is certainly intuitively obvious. In connection with the shared problem of reference of politics and science, it is also possible to quickly outline the arena of discussion in which both domains can exchange views on the current challenges and the possible re-thinking of multilateralism: the increased complexity of world societal and political possibilities for ordering has expanded to such an extent that their concrete implementation ('social structure') and meaningful describability ('semantics') can no longer be thought of as a 'congruent relationship.' A multiplicity of organizational designs goes along with an equally rising number of descriptions that provide them with meaning.

Such has already been experienced in the everyday life of traditional societies – an increasing number of possible 'life plans' ('complexity') gives rise to a multitude of heterogeneous milieus ('social structure'), which in turn generate countless vocabularies and/or self-descriptions ('semantics'), which no longer converge in the one shared description of this society. Likewise, concerning the world societal and political organization, the increased number of conceivable political designs for order ('complexity'), gives rise to a multiplicity of heterogeneous regimes and actors ('social structure'), which in turn also generate countless vocabularies and/or self-descriptions ('semantics'), which can never be brought into congruence.

Semantics and social structure are thus not directly coupled with each other, but rather 'loosely' correlated with each other via the 'variable' of complexity: the more ordering possibilities are conceivable ('complexity'), the more variants are implemented ('social structures'), and the more vocabularies emerge to describe them in a meaningful way ('semantics').

In the arena of conversation outlined above, the possible latent self-limitations then also become clearer as they pose a central topic on which politics and science can exchange views: the attempts to shape world political order in a certain (here: multilateral) way ('social structure') must be met with a form of description ('semantics') that recognizes this plurality and heterogeneity of semantic and social-structural designs and does not hope or aim to undo this evolutional trajectory in any way.

More specifically related to the challenge of re-thinking multilateralism, the possible self-limitations of such a search movement can be seen, for example, in the concept of 'contested multilateralism' (Keohane/Morse). Re-thinking multilateralism is no longer just a matter of surveying a multitude of heterogeneous descriptions of equally heterogeneous forms of organization. Rather, it is at the same time also a matter of reckoning de facto with the countless heterogeneous descriptions of one specific organizational concept (multilateralism) that once created a uniform order, in the sense that these descriptions can no longer be be fed back to one absolutely congruent, quasi-Archimedean point of reference or shared meaning.

The now commonly known 'imagined communities' of historian Benedict Anderson have always existed in the plural, but even in the face of their multiplicity, they were still able to reassure themselves of their 'unity' at least in the concept of the 'nation'. Also the world of the bloc states unfolded against the background of a clear-cut competition of two systems; but as a bipolar world system, it could understand itself as a global unity of these two sides. That such unity can no longer be maintained in this way could already be seen at the level of said traditional national societies. Just like these now feature (self-)descriptions as post-capitalist, post-industrial, or post-modern societies, descriptions of a post-Westphalian, post-state, or post-national order can now also be found at the level of world society.

What all these descriptions have in common is the fact that the prefix of 'post' does not denote an actual solution to the problem of heterogeneity, but rather represents a problem indicator: all these buzzwords guide semantics of meaning and order, which are rather transitional descriptions. They are makeshift or stopgap solutions that use the terminology of a semantics of order that is fading away and whose succeeding structures, however, cannot yet be described in a meaningful way that could guide social and political action.

If politics and science want to exchange views on the aforementioned unreflected premises, the blind spots of their own observation of multilateral forms of ordering, they are faced with the seemingly paradoxical task of searching for a form of world ordering and its description that is no longer unifying but nevertheless uniform in the sense that it can coherently reckon with said diversity.

For politics, then, it is no longer a matter of merely sustaining a political mentality – i.e., a diffuse catch-all notion of multilateralism that feels 'good' and 'right' – or scientific political theory, but precisely of reexamining its own political theory of multilateralism. After all said semantics or descriptions of the political actors are precisely those gateways through which these theories (often subconsciously) become effective. Foreign policy actors are thus asked to reflect on "their very own participation in the generation of the very reality, which becomes a problem for them," (Luhmann).

Against this background – if one considers the current semantics of such political theories and the social structures which they apparently attempt to describe – these efforts appear as the staging of the proverbial fight against windmills. As a very vivid example, the connection between 'multilateralism and democracy', which is usually thought of as a close and quasi-natural one, reflects a hermetic way of thinking that is fixated on the unconditional creation of a uniform world, something which can no longer be sustained in the face of the obvious changes in world society described in detail above. This does not mean that one must give up political ideals such as democracy. Because, after all, doesn't the very idea of democracy urge us to take the finding – that everything that was once a rule is now a negotiation – all the more seriously?

This insight apparently motivates political thinking to shift from an overly normative style of expectation ('This is the way it has always been, this is the way it should always be.') to a more cognitive style of expectation that assumes that ideas must always prove themselves in an equally constantly changing environment; which, moreover, does not leave these very ideas themselves unchanged. Only if one gets involved in this processual thinking – this is suggested by the current state of social scientific research – can one succeed in building up a potential to shape and develop political designs ('Gestaltungspotential'). One cannot reject alternatives and counter-designs a priori, but must engage with them to be able to react to them more comprehensively. Ideas, for example, like the need "to include also a country like China and to treat it at least equally" (Merkel) take this direction. In short: only those who allow control can gain control themselves!

It is particularly the example of a – however exactly formulated – 'democratic multilateralism' that can then lead to filling these political ideas with life in a new way. Namely to once again cognize democracy as an open 'experiment' (Whitman) and to provide translational efforts in the no longer reversible 'Babylonian Confusion of Tongues' of multilateral attempts at order. This does not mean that alternative semantics cannot also be understood as a "Trojan horse"' (Wientzek/Enskat) in the sense of influencing, overwriting, or controlling multilateral structures. However, inconclusive self-descriptions of authoritarian states as "champions of multilateralism" or accusations of a "selective multilateralism" can be countered with

one's own redescription. Yet a redescription that confidently presents itself as an offer in the sense of the classic procedure of a "profitless advertising" (Czempiel) and thus may trigger a dialogue as well as a possibly associated process of confidence-building. In this way, multilateralism then even becomes an actual tool of the 'democratic experiment'.

This then reflects not only the historical experience of the confidence-building measures, which were initially 'invented' in the context of deteriorating East-West relations in the 1970s as an instrument for fortifying the endangered arms control agreements, but were subsequently also further developed precisely because confidence-building turned out to be not only a means en route to securing peace, but already a de facto peacekeeping practice (Hellmann). At the same time, this also shows that not all experiential knowledge must become completely obsolete, but must always be kept alive by reflecting on its semantic, i.e. political-theoretical background and adapting it to the respective context.