
Concept of the main research area

“The transformation of contemporary societies: Building order in a borderless world”

Introduction

The transformation of contemporary societies is to a considerable degree a reaction to phenomena of the dissolution of borders. For almost all areas of societal life, it can be observed that processes of communication and exchange, of social connection and social conflict are crossing over the borders of the sphere of action of the established societal institutions and hence of the societal establishments, standards and behavioural patterns by which these processes were regulated and channelled, for the most part with great success, in the modern era of the 20th century. Phenomena of dissolution of borders with considerable consequences for the development of world society are also to be found in so-called fragile societies, societies which have not formed such a system of institutions or which have lost it in the course of political upheavals. We can observe phenomena of dissolution of borders “externally” as well as “internally”: externally as the overstepping of limits of action of universal social institutions (inter-society dissolution of borders), and internally as the overstepping of the limits of action of institutions which are specifically directed towards individual fields of activity within society (society-internal dissolution of borders). Phenomena of border dissolution lead to a loss of influence on the part of the established societal institutions and create the need for the formation of a new order. The object of the focal research area is accordingly to research new forms of the building of order in the context of a borderless world.

Inter-society dissolution of borders

The historical precursor for the phenomenon of an inter-society dissolution of borders having considerable effects on the existing system of institutions is without any doubt a development which dates back to early modern times: the emergence of an integrated world economy. However, it is in the present era of society that the loss of influence on the part of the national state institutions in the regulation of globalised movements of goods and finances is becoming irrefutably clear and the development of new structures of regulation, which are operational on a transnational basis, is increasingly being recognised as a necessity for overall gains in welfare, as well as for the avoidance of economic crises, which are no longer regionally compartmentalised. An important aspect of the inter-society dissolution of borders of economic activity is the emergence of cross-border labour markets. Labour, as a commodity which is particularly dependent on institutionally formed frameworks for the protection and the social safeguarding of its suppliers, is especially affected by the loss of influence of national state institutions. Attempts to internationalise the institutions of the employment market and new forms of transnational creation of institutions are accordingly important objects of research with relation to the transformation of contemporary societies.

In the area of political activity, the inter-societal dissolution of the borders of the political ideals of democracy and human rights are a considerable factor in the transformation of contemporary societies.

The increasing need to react to threats to natural resources or to societal cohabitation through internationally coordinated political and legal measures is leading to the situation that the political and legal institutions of the nation states and their monopolies of power are increasingly losing their status as the highest authority with relation to binding decision-making and the enforcement of decisions. Particularly since the end of the Second World War, different kinds of supranational political and legal institutions have come about: international courts such as the European Court of Human Rights or the International Criminal Court, international systems of negotiation such as the UN Climate Change Conference, and international processes of standard-setting, such as for instance the definition of the United Nations International Labour Organisation on the question of what counts as exploitative child labour. At the same time, the opportunities to enforce supranational law and transnational setting of standards are limited by the fact that all supranational institutions which impose standards must have their sanctioning power transferred to them from nation states' monopolies of power. The issue of the legitimisation of such institutions, which have been confirmed at most indirectly by democratic decisions, also emerges once again. Processes of transnational formation and enforcement of standards therefore prove to be a central field of research for the issue of building order in the context of a borderless world.

Society-internal dissolution of borders

The societal system of institutions of the modern period of the 20th century was, in the developed western democracies up to the 1980s, characterised by a high degree of labour division, in the sense of an assignment of areas of responsibilities which was largely unchallenged in society – a division of labour in the family in which the model of the male sole breadwinner was the norm. Normal working conditions were such that employees bound up their working lives with one particular company and its concerns; there was a system of industrial relations in which the regulation of working conditions was largely delegated to larger bodies such as employers' associations and unions; there was a formation of specialised institutions, responsibilities and systems of actors in many areas of political and social life, as well a relationship between citizens and politics in which the exercising of political decision-making power was predominantly left to the elected representatives, and so on. Many of these self-evident institutional features have since become less self-evident, or indeed problematic. It is not only changed societal conditions – for instance, the process of economic globalisation – which have contributed to this, but also changed value systems and levels of demands from members of society, as well as different focuses of attention and modes of perception, and the stores of information which the information and communication infrastructures of the new digital media have opened up or made accessible.

Hence citizens today in the developed democracies of western societies perceive the procedure of political decision-making according to the established channels of representative democracy as being a form of government without their input, and demand, in matters in which they feel themselves to be personally affected – whether a school reform, a large-scale project in their region, or a political decision for the future about societal infrastructures – to be listened to and involved more directly than is permitted by the political institutions which are in place. The organisation or grouping of these desires for participation in citizens' initiatives and social movements, and their participation as "stakeholders" in citizens' forums or mediation processes, lead to new forms of political steering and decision-making. Since the new "cogoverning" societal actors however have no democratic mandate, the inherited models of legitimisation of political rule are subjected to a process of erosion, and the question arises of the legitimacy of the newly developing forms of governance of political creation of order.

While the specialisation and the expert knowledge of institutions was long seen as an assurance of specialist competence and the ability to solve problems, to an increasing degree criticism has been

levelled at compartmentalisation and a narrow-minded perception of issues. Demands for a holistic view of issues, the definition of cross-domain tasks and networking initiatives are tending to lead towards a dissolution of the borders of policy areas. Examples of this are a comprehensive integration policy, protection of the environment and the consumer, and the connection of policies relating to the employment market and social policy. Changed requirements, demands and desires to participate cannot only be observed with relation to institutions in political life, but also affect the relations with many existing institutions in life and society: children's crèches run as parents' initiatives, patient self-help organisations, and home schooling (which is becoming increasingly popular in the USA), associations of Catholic lay-people, and many other kinds of civil initiatives are the expression of a new society-internal creation of order beyond the limits of action of conventional institutions in society.

Alongside this, it is particularly clearly in the world of work that changed conditions in society, in combination with a transformation of values, have led to a considerable weakening of the established institutions and have caused a considerable need for new creation of order. A central keyword here is the flexibilisation of work, which includes different aspects of the change in working conditions as compared to normal employment. This refers to the temporal and spatial flexibilisation of working activity, which leads to a dissolution of the borders between working time and free time, and hence on the one hand makes higher demands of employees in terms of reachability and mobility, but on the other hand opens up innovative possibilities to connect working life and family life. However, the concept also refers to the flexibilisation of career paths, which leads away from the former usual case, continual employment in one company, and makes the career path a project which is individually planned and has its own chances of gain as well as risks of failure. Correspondingly, in the domain of organised economic activity, the border between the cooperation models of company-based hierarchy and market-like exchange is eroding, and there are new possible solutions for the most varied types of economic needs which are to be found somewhere in the continuum of market – hybrid (network) – hierarchy.

The connection between the two perspectives

Inter-society und society-internal dissolutions of borders are often not unconnected, but interact with each other. This is reflected in the new ways of building order. Hence the new forms of governing discussed under the heading of governance are both a reaction to increased demands for participation and the result of an increasing interweaving of several levels, which makes it necessary to harmonise regional, national and supranational political decision-making institutions with each other.

The new digital media and the information and communication infrastructures within them are in the process of fundamentally changing the structure of the public sphere of society. Under these conditions, local events can, in a manner which was previously unimaginable, gain the attention of a whole society, or even across societies, and society-internal initiatives can be networked across societies. In many areas of societal life the ties of organised social action to physical space and territorial borders are losing significance, at least in relative terms. This is the case for such varied forms of organised action as social movements, value creation chains, and corruption networks in the same way.

The increased opportunities and requirements for border-crossing networking and exchanges at the same time also raise the opportunities and requirements for mobility, both for individuals and for organisations. This in turn places existing society-internal and inter-society institutions under pressure to conform, as can be seen in schools in the introduction of centralised examinations, or in further education in the Bologna Reforms.

Research focus and approach

The transformation of contemporary societies, considered from the perspective of the building of order in a borderless world, is a multi-faceted phenomenon. It concerns the micro-level of social interaction and its foundations of behaviour, as well as the societal meso-level of organised social actions, and the macro-level of systemic structures and processes. It also cannot be tied to any particular field of activity in societal life, but concerns the area of political and legal activity, and the normative domain, as well as the domain of economic activity and work or the domain of education and culture. The common thematic focus of this focal research area consists in analysing a particular phenomenon, building order in a borderless world, which represents a considerable driving force in societal transformation, on all levels and in various domains of a society's activity.

The research work carried out in this focal research area has the goal of identifying and analysing significant phenomena of creation of order.. The analysis of the phenomena of societal transformation which are respectively considered begins with research into the factors which are largely responsible for the fact that the limits of action of existing institutions are being overstepped and phenomena of border dissolution are coming about. Next, the processes of communication and exchange and the forms of consensual or conflictive social relationships are identified in which the dissolution of borders concerned is socially expressed. Subsequently an evaluation can be made of the newly created need for institutions to orient, support and regulate activities, insofar as the established societal institutions, standards and patterns of behaviour in their present form are no longer adequate to fulfil this function. Finally, research is to be carried out into the issue of whether new types of creation of order are developing, and if so which ones, as well as the relationship which they have with the established institutions. The determination of their relationship with existing institutions is a decisive step of the analysis, as it directs the perspective towards the individually varying form which the new forms of building order can take: from an innovative recombination of existing institutional arrangements to their supplementation and extension through new aspects, all the way up to the complete substitutions and destruction of prior institutions, standards and patterns of behaviour.

In all of these aspects, the analysis of the building of order in a borderless world represents a challenge for formation of theories within the social sciences, as well as for the formation of methods.. Many of the relevant theoretical concepts assume the unity of the society as a whole, and the functional autonomy of the different areas of activity, as expressed in the existing constellation of institutions, as reference parameters for the conceptual capturing of societal structures and processes. The collection and evaluation of representative empirical data is also primarily oriented according to these reference parameters. From an empirical point of view, then, the task emerges to connect empirical sets of data of this kind in an innovative manner, as well as the task of developing empirical experimental designs which can provide a better view of border-crossing social phenomena. From a theoretical point of view, the challenge consists in conceptually capturing the structures and modes of functioning of new forms of the building of order, and working out the basic theoretical concepts which are necessary for this.

The research profile of the focal research area is oriented towards focussing on a wide spectrum of areas of research within the social sciences – areas including sociology, the political sciences, economics, regional studies, educational studies and cultural studies – from the specific point of view of the issue of the transformation of contemporary societies. It aims to use the breadth of competence in Social Sciences present at the University Duisburg-Essen, and to concentrate it on a particular comprehensive but precise research issue. The focal research area “The transformation of contemporary societies: Building order in a borderless world” therefore also contributes towards giving Social Sciences at the University Duisburg-Essen an unmistakable and visible profile.