Ambivalence in the World Polity –
Conflict Resolution and Conflict Dynamics in Neo-Institutional Perspective

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Vorbemerkung

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Abstract:
The neo-institutional world polity perspective has been criticized for its apparent lack of an account of conflict. Critics assert that the world polity perspective therefore is more of an apologist’s account of globalization than an analytical approach. We argue to the contrary that the neo-institutional perspective and its explanatory models suggest a number of very important, but previously neglected areas of research of in the field of conflict studies. As examples we discuss the regulation of conflict as well as the genesis of new conflict dynamics. The legitimacy of conflict resolution mechanisms at the global level has led to increasingly isomorphic regulations of conflict. On the other hand, the universalism of globally diffused concepts such as human rights has led to the rise of new types of actors as well as to new conflict dynamics.

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In this article we assess the potential contribution of neo-institutionalism to an understanding of conflicts in world society. Neoinstitutional perspectives have steadily gained influence in debates on globalization and world society over recent years (Campbell 2004; Dierkes/Zorn 2005; Lechner/Boli 2005). John W. Meyer’s contribution is of obvious central importance in these debates. According to Meyer’s view of world society, highly abstracted global precepts determine aspects of individual, organizational and nation-states’ behavior. However, these arguments are often criticized and countered with claims that such a “cultural” view of world society is unable to account for economic inequalities, political power relations, and violent conflict. In this paper, we address these criticisms with an attempt to point out the potential contribution of the neo-institutional perspective to the analysis of conflict.

We focus on the prevention and regulation of conflict on the one hand, and on the genesis of new conflicts rooted in newly-institutionalized actor identities on the other hand. We argue that institutional perspectives can be brought to bear on both, the diffusion of conflict resolution mechanisms and the regulation of conflict, as well as the proliferation of new dynamics of conflict. We begin with a brief discussion of neo-institutional theory. Next, we examine whether this theory can contribute to an analysis of conflict and if yes, how. We then provide suggestive empirical examples of this explanatory potential by looking at the diffusion of interstate reconciliation and reparation measures, as well as formal dispute resolution mechanisms as new forms of conflict resolution. We also examine the conflicts around interpretation and recognition
that have arisen through the institutionalization of human rights. These examples show that a cultural sociology perspective can address important aspects of conflict genesis and resolution.

2. Neo-Institutionalism and world polity theory

The neo-institutional perspective, which has established itself as one of the more elaborated research programs emerging out of the theoretical fragmentation in the 1970s (cf. Powell/DiMaggio 1991; Scott 1995: esp. 33-62; Dierkes/Zorn 2005), is grounded in the notion that individual action and social interaction are always embedded in institutions. However, in contrast to normative and regulative concepts of institutions, this perspective has highlighted the cognitive dimension of institutions, focusing on the taken-for-granted rules which shape actors’ attitudes toward their social context and thus structure action. This cognitive turn is supported by the neo-institutional view that individual action is neither entirely rational, nor exclusively norm-oriented, but rather a dramaturgical display of adherence to institutionalized rules of behavior, such as models, scripts, and myths. Neo-institutionalism thus radicalizes the phenomenological tradition (Berger/Luckmann 1969), by seeing not only social reality but the very identities and interests of individual and collective actors as socially constructed.

One of the founders of neo-institutionalism in sociology is John W. Meyer. His empirical research on education and organizations in the 1970s led him to the conclusion that the formal structure of organizations is related less to rational cost-benefit considerations, but rather follows models that are legitimated in its social environment (Meyer/Rowan 1977). It is only such legitimated models that can explain the highly ‘isomorphic’ structures across schools. Such structures are thus said to be decoupled from the functional requirements of organizations. While Meyer initially
focused on cross-organizational comparisons, he soon extended his reasoning to the international sphere. In numerous research projects with collaborators at Stanford University he also found structural isomorphism across highly diverse systems of education (Meyer/Kamens/Benavot 1992), women’s rights (Ramirez/Soysal/Shanahan 1997), citizenship (McNeely 1995), environmental protection (Meyer/Frank/Hironaka/Schofer/Tuma 1997), and decolonization (Strang 1990). These findings suggested an institutional explanation for structural as well as substantive aspects of modern nation-states and it is precisely here that the fundamental insight of neo-institutional world polity theory is to be found.

The neo-institutional perspective on world society builds on the assumption that nation-states, formal organizations and individual actors are embedded in an overarching institutional structure (“world society” or “world polity”, cf. Meyer 1980, 2005). The world polity is thus conceived of in macro-phenomenological terms (Meyer/Boli/Thomas/Ramirez 1997: 146-48). In clear distinction to “realism” as it dominates the international relations literature, global phenomena are not reduced to the presumed interests and power relations between states. To the contrary, the role of world society in constituting national sovereignty is emphasized. At the same time, the world polity perspective also distinguishes itself from macro-sociological conceptualizations of the world system as a hierarchy of economically-based power relations as in Wallerstein’s world systems theory. Instead of these power relations, the world polity perspective sees global society as a set of collective expectation regarding the form and structure of the interests of and relations between states, formal organizations and individuals (cf. Meyer 1980: 117). It is precisely in this distinction that the institutional perspective emphasizes its link with the strong program in “cultural sociology” as proposed by Jeffrey Alexander (1996). Not unlike
constructivists in international relations (Checkel 1998), the world polity perspective sees the institutionalization of relations between actors as a precondition to the constitution of national interests.

In its cultural aspects, world society is based on elaborated models of rationality. Meyer follows a strictly phenomenological interpretation of Max Weber’s theories of occidental rationalization. Here, rationality is seen as a myth, rational action as a ritual enactment, and rationalization as the institutionalization of a cultural system of aims, aims-means-assignments and rational actors (Meyer/Boli/Thomas 1987). Meyer traces the cultural system of rationality to the transformation of Christianity in the early modern period in Europe. Highly generalized and universal conceptualizations of the applicability of rationality to the world emerged in this context. These conceptualizations ascribed an almost ontological status to the state, which was simultaneously constituted as a rational actor and made the center of this-worldly processes of social development (Thomas/Meyer 1984). While conventional modernization theories understand rationalization as a move toward greater efficiency, Meyer describes rationalization as the institutionalization of rational “actorhood”. The convergence of social developments is thus not the result of functional adaptation, but rather the consequence of a reliance on legitimated cultural models of rationality. The global polity perspective also takes on Weber’s agnostic to critical assessment of rationality in normative terms. Far from aiming to legitimate the apparent dominance of European and North American patterns of political and economic organization, Meyer observes this domination empirically and analyzes its unfolding.
In its socio-structural aspects, world society is based on the increasing density of social fields on a global scale since the middle of the 19th century. New actors and groups emerge as social carriers of globalization within global society. The absence of a global state leads to the important role of international organizations, transnational NGOs, and the sciences and professions. International organizations constitute public stages on which the states gain legitimacy through the ritualistic enactment of institutionalized models (Finnemore 1993; McNeely 1995; Berkovitch 1999). The United Nations and its various organizations have come to play a role of particular importance as such stages for communication. International organizations are simultaneously actors involved in the propagation of institutional models of behavior, such as in the codification of human rights (Barnett/Finnemore 2004). Transnational NGOs play an important part in the diffusion of models of behavior, particularly as they grew almost exponentially in the second half of the 20th century and increasingly linked local movements into a global network (Boli/Thomas 1999; Risse/Ropp/Sikkink 1999). The sciences and professions and the epistemic communities (Haas 1992) they support enjoy significant authority as the “significant other” of states, organizations and individuals in the definition and elaboration of cultural definitions of rationality. All three types of social actors interact constantly and mutually reinforce their positions. International organizations are thus arenas of communication where NGOs and academic and professional experts exchange views on perceived challenges.

The neo-institutional perspective hypothesizes that the increasing integration of rational actors – nation-states, organizations, or individuals – into a global polity will lead to an intensification of the orientation of these actors toward highly rationalized and universalistic sets of expectations. Consequently, the more this integration
progresses, the more actors will adapt their formal structures to coercive, normative and, notably, mimetic pressures.

3. Conflict – A Neo-Institutional Blind Spot?

The world polity perspective has been criticized for its macro-phenomenological stance just like neo-institutionalism in organizational analysis has been. The central criticism focuses on the systematic lack of an account of actors and their interests and power structures. Given this absence, neo-institutional perspectives are said to be unable to contribute to an analysis of conflict (Perrow 1985; Hirsch 1997). The world polity perspective thus portrays developments in a rosy fashion and glosses over economic dependency, war and violence. It thus merely modifies modernization theories in some details, which legitimate or even justify the rise of the U.S. to a hegemonic status as an economic, political-military and cultural superpower.

3.1. Common Criticism

This criticism is clearly not justified at the level of generality that it is raised. Meyer’s diagnosis of “Westernization” is certainly not intended as an affirmation of such developments. It should be remembered that the scope of neo-institutional explanations is self-consciously limited given the middle-range theory status of this perspective. The empirical focus on processes of structural isomorphism does not preclude an analysis of other global phenomena such as political or economic conflict from a micro-realist or macro-realist perspective. Meyer himself has portrayed the world polity perspective as a complement to Wallerstein’s world system (Meyer 1980). The very general objection of a lack of an account of conflict does not really aim at the explanatory core of the world polity perspective, but instead highlights the limited scope of applicability of such neo-institutional models.
Beyond this broad criticism, however, more specific issues have been raised as well which focus much more on the neo-institutional model *within* its self-proscribed scope of explanation. Some critics have thus shown that processes of the global institutionalization of norms of behavior themselves already necessitate an account of agency. Such arguments have focused on three points in particular (Koenig 2005: 376-77).

The first criticism addresses the emergence of world polity institutions. It remains unclear within the world polity perspective which factors are relevant for an understanding of the emergence of specific sets of expectations unless there is some account for the creative agency of individuals. Finnemore and Sikkink (1998: 895-898) argue that the process of institutionalization is characterized by different logics of action. Conventional accounts of institutional isomorphism are thus only relevant in phases of the global diffusion and internationalization of norms. During the phase of norm emergence, however, symbolic compliance is of no particular relevance as compliance does not grant legitimacy gains. Rather, institutional entrepreneurs are guided by their interests. This parallels similar arguments in organizational analysis where DiMaggio has demanded more agentic accounts for the early phase of the structuration of organizational fields and actors (DiMaggio 1991: 267-292). Such a modification of the world polity perspective would lead to an expectation of a significant level of innovation and conflict during the emergence of cultural models of rationalization.

A second line of criticism focuses on the transmission of global polity precepts. Few institutionalists have paid much attention to the social mechanisms that transmit global precepts to nation-states, organizations and individuals (Campbell 2004: 78).
While DiMaggio and Powell (1983) identified three broad categories of isomorphic pressures – normative, coercive, and mimetic –, actual processes of transmission cannot be explained through this categorization. An account of agency and networks as avenues of transmission seems to be necessary here (Finnemore 1996; Risse/Ropp/Sikkink 1999). Such an account in turn would highlight potential conflicts during processes of institutionalization.

A third line of criticism highlights the lack of an account of local adaptations of global polity precepts. Meyer’s formulations acknowledge that global polity precepts may be enacted formally at local levels, but that this enactment will typically be decoupled from the substantive aims of particular forms of organization. This decoupling is as typical at the nation-state level as neo-institutional organization scholars find at the organizational level (Meyer/Rowan 197; Meyer et al. 1997). Once local dynamics become the focus of investigation, for example the dynamics brought about by the expectations of donor organizations in countries of the global South, it will be inevitable that local actor and power constellations will have to be taken into account. Such constellations would bring about conflict dynamics that would have an impact on the selective reception, partial implementation or context specific interpretation of global precepts (Acharya 2004: esp. 244; Engels 2003).

These three strands of criticism suggest that some of the core hypotheses of the global polity perspective should be expanded to include accounts of agency to make an understanding of global processes of institutionalization as well as of conflict dynamics possible. This expansion should focus on two areas: the emergence of global norms and the social processes by which such norms are institutionalized and transmitted to the local level.
Yet, it would be wrong to interpret these criticisms to suggest that the world polity perspective includes no account of conflict whatsoever. While a specific theory of conflict has so far not been formulated in the world polity perspective, critics have ignored the fact that the macro-phenomenological and cultural understanding of globalization suggests the potential of a series of original hypotheses on conflict in world society.

3.2. A Neo-Institutional Perspective on Conflict in World Society

Such potential contributions to a theory of global conflict can first be found in an understanding of responses to conflict in the second half of the 20th century. While wars were constitutive of the initial establishment of states and their powers in the Westphalian system (Tilly 1990), a redefinition of legitimate functions of states came along with the interpenetration of global institutional structures. The activities of international organizations, starting with the League of Nations, thus have increasingly aimed at the prevention, suppression or regulation of conflict. Given this focus on conflict prevention, it may not be surprising that international organizations privilege behavioral models and norms that are oriented toward conflict prevention. Importantly, this prevention of conflict is not brought about on the basis of a rational calculus of self-interested nation-states, but rather through the long-term institutionalization of behavioral norms and actorhood at the global level.

This line of argument is not opposed to claims that a neo-institutional perspective can be brought to bear on an analysis of the emergence of conflict on the other hand. This contribution to an understanding of the emergence of conflict might come in two ways. The assumption that actors are embedded in a commonly shared, highly generalized cultural frame of reference – especially in the absence of a central
 authoritative interpretation – implies a multiplicity of potential objects of conflict. The multitude of actors who feel legitimated by universalistic behavioral models can thus be expected to lead to an increase in the number and intensity of conflict. “The greater the number of entities, whether individuals, organizations, or nation-states, that pursue similar interests requiring similar resources, the more the entities will come into conflict with each other […].”(Meyer/Boli/Thomas/Ramirez 1997: 170). By providing universalistic interpretations of local conflict, the global polity also leads to an increasingly ideological interpretation of conflict. The ambiguity and internal contradictions of global precepts might also be hypothesized to increase the potential for conflict, for example around counter claims involving liberty versus equality, or progress versus justice.

The global polity, secondly, does not only produce new objects of conflict, but also new parties to conflicts. One of the central claims of neo-institutional understandings of global society is that occidental rationalism does not produce a single legitimate actor, but rather a multiplicity of actors. Nation-states, organizations and individuals are only the most important or visible of such actors, but several other kinds of actors are seen as legitimate. The global polity through this legitimation thus constitutes potential parties to conflict at several levels of analysis, all of whom legitimate their actions in universalistic terms (Meyer/Boli/Thomas/Ramirez 1997: 171).

In sum, then, despite its limited scope and the need for an account for agency and transmission in process of institutionalization, neo-institutional theory does make a significant contribution to the explanation of conflict. Below we would like to substantiate this explanatory potential through the use of some empirical examples. These examples will illustrate our thesis that highly rationalized and universalistic
principles contribute to the diffusion of standardized responses to conflict as well as to the proliferation of new dynamics of conflict.

4. Empirical illustration

The literature that is based on empirical research from a neo-institutional perspective has grown significantly over the past years, but conflict plays a marginal role in this literature at best, even though many of the issues addressed by this research have addressed topics with a potential for conflict – from education reform, to women’s rights, citizenship regimes or environmental policies. In the discussion below we focus on examples of such research that has explicitly addressed conflict dynamics. Initially we will focus on mechanisms for conflict prevention or resolution, then we will discuss the extent to which processes of institutionalization themselves have generated conflicts.

4.1. The Global Institutionalization of Conflict Prevention and Resolution

Some of the potential contributions of the global polity model to an understanding of conflict become obvious in a discussion of the diffusion and standardization of forms of conflict resolution. As mentioned above, international organizations have increasingly focused on the prevention of violence in the second half of the 20th century. Supported by numerous transnational NGOs, these attempts resulted in the outlawing of offensive wars in the Briand-Kellogg-Pact (1928) and in the UN Charter in 1945. However, conflict resolution was not only rooted in efforts of international law, but also in the construction of models, schema and scripts of conflict resolution. In dealing with political-military conflict, the (a) politics of memory and commemoration exemplify this development. In private economic dealings, the
resolution of conflicts through various mechanisms of (b) formal dispute resolution provides another example.

(a) Under the Westphalian system, interstate conflicts were resolved by treaties and military power. While wars have by no means disappeared, a new form of conflict resolution focused on the politics of memory and reparations for past conflicts has emerged with the goal of preventing future conflicts. In parallel with the injunction against offensive wars and the emphasis on individual rights in the post-World War II era, a consciousness of victimhood has proliferated in the post-Westphalian system that makes demands for redress and reconciliation plausible.

Some incentives for reconciliation emanate directly from the UN, UNESCO and other international organizations. The involvement of international organizations is most clearly visible in their sponsorship of the ad-hoc-tribunals in Den Haag and Arusha to investigate war crimes committed in the former Yugoslavia and genocide in Rwanda respectively. These tribunals have also begun to prosecute individuals, such as the late former Serbian president Slobodan Milošević for crimes against humanity. The creation of the International Criminal Court (ICC) in 2002 has even led to an independent agency investigating and potentially punishing state-sponsored and individual war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity.

This diffusion of practices of commemoration and reconciliation is not only advanced by international organizations, however. It can also be traced to highly networked activities of professionals and public intellectuals. Debates about reconciliation here are beginning to focus increasingly on measures to promote active reconciliation between parties to previous conflicts. Such a focus can be seen in discussions about claims for redress by indigenous populations in the U.S. and in Australia or in the
deliberations of truth and reconciliation commissions in South Africa or Chile. As John Torpey (2006) argues, the (West) German post-war trajectory serves as an important point of reference in these debates. German attempts at material compensation and the acceptance of collective moral responsibility emphasized in dealings with former victims of aggression as well as with former enemies, serve as a model that leads to a diffusion of post-Westphalian mechanisms for conflict resolution.

The extent to which German attempts at Vergangenheitsbewältigung have become somewhat of a model can be seen in the development of history education around the world (Dierkes 2003; Schissler/Soysal 2005; Cole 2006). The open attempt to account for German atrocities committed during the 1930s and 40s against German populations as well as those residing in occupied countries were not initially aimed at such reconciliation. Instead, they were an element of a sweeping paradigmatic change from grand national narratives to more social-scientific historiography in (West) Germany in the early 1960s. Outside of Germany, however, this account has been seen as a (successful) attempt at reconciliation that can serve as a model for universal and rational principles of reconciliation and reparations. History education has thus come to be seen as a rational tool in efforts at reconciliation between parties to a previous conflict in many parts of the world. It is indicative that the current Iraqi government is charged with providing an account of the Bath-dictatorship in museums as well as with new editions of textbooks that are to provide an alternative historical interpretation.

Sets of expectations that are institutionalized at the global level have thus come to guide states’ approaches to war, genocide and persecution. As such these expectations
explain the diffusion of new, highly formalized and ritualized forms of conflict resolution. Neo-institutional conceptualizations of world society thus would not predict a decline in the number of conflicts – an absurd claim looking at the 20th century –, but rather a standardization of interstate conflict resolution that revolves around rational and universalistic principles.

(b) The diffusion of formal mechanisms of “alternative dispute resolution” (ADR) is a good example of the institutionalization of methods to mitigate against conflict. ADR has found widespread acceptance as a method to ostensibly reduce the costs of litigation in the capitalist democracies. The introduction of interstate dispute resolution mechanisms as part of the World Trade Organization regulation of international trade was a crucial step in the diffusion of ADR. Under the WTO regime, ADR supplanted previous mechanisms that were non-binding and thus lacked credibility. Adding an element of credibility has also implied an increasing regulation of conflict, however. Just glancing at the political rhetoric around the current economic rise of China compared to that of Japan in the late 1980s suggests a reduction of the potential of civilizational conflict previously inherent in trade disputes.

The global institutionalization of ADR can be seen empirically in the example of the integration of ADR teaching units into the recently reformed Japanese legal training curriculum (Saegusa 2006; Saegusa/Dierkes 2006). During the past two decades, the relatively low rate of litigation was seen as one of the particular strengths of the Japanese economy. Some saw this low rate as rooted in the use of non-court and especially informal forms of dispute resolution. As the Japanese economy has become more and more integrated with the world economy during the stagnation of the 1990s
and now seems to be pulling out of recession on the strength of production networks on the Asian continent, Japanese businesses find themselves more and more often in conflictual situations that are not easily resolved through network ties and informal relations. Japanese managers bemoaned the fact that there was very little legal support available to them in such situations given the extremely low number of trained lawyers in Japan generally and in corporate legal departments more specifically. This lack of lawyers not only perpetuated the quasi-monopoly position of the relatively few practicing lawyers but also led to real competitive disadvantages of Japanese corporations operating abroad. A reform of Japanese legal training was not possible, however, until Japanese law firms began to feel threatened by Anglo-American “mega-firms” and their threat to native firms’ quasi-monopoly. Meanwhile, Japanese politicians had been pushing for a strengthening of individual rights for some time at the expense of collective rights and duties. The reform of legal education led to a reorganization of undergraduate law departments into graduate law schools in 2004 on the example of U.S. law professional schools. New content was added to the legal curriculum in the course of these reforms, including the teaching of alternative dispute resolution. While informal mediation techniques as they had been practiced particularly in the Japanese corporate sectors for years were not included in the curriculum, techniques that were imported from North America, such as “conciliation,” “arbitration,” and “mediation” quickly found their place in new graduate law courses. The fact that such courses are largely taught by internationally well-networked faculty at the most prestigious universities shows that isomorphism can be induced through an embedding in global social structures and cultural patterns without a necessary element of coercion.
The diffusion of ADR to Japan that we have sketched here serves as an example of the global institutionalization of normative and cognitive expectations regarding the resolution of economic conflicts. Even in contexts where conflict resolution has been practiced for long periods, the forms of this practice adapt to global expectations to gain legitimacy. In this adaptation, the symbolic changes, however, seem to outweigh the substantive changes in significance.

4.2. World Society and the Genesis of New Conflicts

While the examples we have sketched out above remain firmly within the framework of structural isomorphism, an analysis of the development of new conflicts adds an entirely new dimension to the neoinstitutional perspective. It is precisely in this area that we argue that the potential contributions of this perspective have not yet been realized. Both, conflict objects as well as parties to conflicts can be examined productively in terms of the world polity conditions for their emergence. We would like to illustrate this very briefly with reference to (a) conflicts over interpretation that have been the result of the internationalization of human rights, and (b) the globally visible mobilization of ethnic movements in conflicts of recognition.

(a) The internationalization of human rights has been examined extensively by researchers from the world polity perspective. The majority of such research has focused on the long-term patterns in national constitutions, the ratification of international conventions of human rights, and their political implementation at the national level (Boli 1987; Hafner-Burton/Tsutsui 2005). It is only recently that the potential for conflict that is inherent in the post-war diffusion of a human rights discourse is being examined. Many potential conflicts would fall clearly outside of the scope of neo-institutional modeling, like value conflicts that arise in the
international codification of human rights out of divergent traditions of political thought, or conflicts of interest over the implementation of human rights, particularly in repressive states (Risse/Ropp/Sikkink 1999). The pay-off for a neo-institutional approach, however, can be found in an analysis of human rights as new objects of conflict.

Global precepts can generally be characterized as universalistic, abstract and independent of context. These characteristics leave global precepts fundamentally open to interpretation. Human rights are particularly open to questions of interpretation (Bonacker 2003). Conflicts about these interpretations are highly likely as there is no central authority to adjudicate between conflicting interpretations. Consequently, the history of the institutionalization since 1945 offers numerous examples of such conflict over interpretation (Koenig 2005a). The conflict between the First and Second World over civil liberties on the one hand and economic rights on the other hand, is only one of the more obvious of such conflicts given the resulting competing conventions in 1966. This opposition has been replaced by the contemporary differences over the concept of development between the global North and South. Developing countries were thus able to enshrine a right to development at the UN level in 1986 against the will of the U.S., but the legally-binding codification of this right has been prevented by the resistance of developed countries. It is characteristic of these types of conflicts that all parties claim to offer the correct interpretation of a given right. This suggests that it is the openness to interpretation of universalistic human rights itself that opens the door to new conflicts.

(b) Beyond conflicts over interpretation, a neo-institutional perspective might also be brought to bear on the emergence of local parties to conflict. Given the fundamental
commitment to a problematization of actors and interests, neoinstitutional researchers
are in a particularly good position to examine social processes as to their constitution.
It is globally institutionalized cultural patterns in particular that are able to legitimate
a number of different kinds of actors and thus to constitute new parties to conflicts.
This is the case not only for the most important social actors within the global polity,
nation-states, organizations, and individuals, but also for social movements like
groups engaged in conflicts of recognition involving ethnic, religious or linguistic
groups.

It is generally well-known that the mobilization of ethnic groups has increased
significantly since 1945, sometimes with violent consequences. The Minorities at Risk
(Gurr 1993) project has provided empirical evidence of this rise as well. Secondary
analyses of these data have shown that this growth cannot be entirely explained by
endogenous factors like the cultural distance of ethnic groups to majority society,
economic disadvantages, or a general lack of development. Theses analyses suggest
that mobilization is related to social embedding in world polity structures.
Interestingly, membership in international organizations has a negative impact on
mobilization while involvement in transnational NGO networks has a positive impact
on the mobilization of ethnic groups and the development of both, violent and
peaceful, conflicts. The world polity perspective offers a plausible explanation for this
counterintuitive observation (Tsutsui 2004). While participation in international
organizations and the ritual performance of the expectations of these organizations
strengthens state authority and thus prevents protest, involvement with transnational
NGO networks makes opportunity structures, new resources and cultural repertoires
for mobilization available. Such networks thus touch upon the three factors that have
been identified as most crucial in the social movements literature. Cultural repertoires
are of particular importance in this case as they configure identities and interest of collective actors. Indeed, the global human rights discourse has produced a multiplicity of categories on the basis of the grammar of minority rights, multiculturalism and identity politics. Such categories justify an emphasis of latent ethnic, religious and linguistic differences and makes their transformation into concrete conflicts possible (Koenig 2005b).

The impact of the embedding of particularistic groups into the world polity has been confirmed by other studies as well. Tsutsui (in press) has shown for Japan for example, that the ratification of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1979) encouraged the mobilization of the Korean minority as well as of the indigenous Ainu, while Burakumin had a longer history of organized protests and was thus less dependent on global polity legitimacy. Similarly, European conflicts over recognition of religious migrants and linguistic minorities have to be seen at least partly in light of the legitimacy of cultural difference in the context of the decline of legitimacy of assimilationist, nation-focused policies (Koenig 1999, 2005c; Soysal 1997). Paradoxically, the institutionalization of highly abstract, universalistic precepts thus begets particularistic struggles, identities and constellations of conflict.

5. Conclusions

In this article, we have aimed to point to the general underestimation of an understanding of conflict from a world polity perspective. By briefly examining the genesis of some very central objects of conflict (human rights) and of parties to conflicts (ethnic movements, religious and linguistic minorities), as well as the diffusion of conflict resolution mechanisms (reconciliation, reparations, and alternative dispute resolution) we showed that it is exactly the emphasis on cultural
aspects within the world polity perspective that holds the most promise for an analysis of conflict. Such a perspective could explain why the global institutionalization of rational and universalistic principles might lead to both, new objects of conflicts, as well as new dynamics of conflict.

We have only touched upon conflicts that arise out of the integration of nation-states into world society (Beckerfeld 2003; Wimmer/Min 2006) or out of protest-movements against global precepts (fundamentalism, anti-globalization movements, etc.) (Lechner/Boli 2005: 191-214). These movements would certainly also be fruitful fields for an empirical analysis of a sociology of conflict from a world polity perspective. We have also largely left out a discussion of the relation between the long-term, macro-phenomenological changes discussed in the world polity approach with micro-sociological examinations of their exact unfolding. This relation is surely a central challenge to the world polity approach if its distance from conventional analyses of conflict is to be bridged.

We hope to have shown that neo-institutional approaches – while limited in scope and by agency and network considerations – may generate a number of interesting hypotheses for conflict studies. Likewise, we hope to have demonstrated that neo-institutional perspectives might also profit from paying closer attention to the dynamics of conflict triggered by processes of institutionalization.
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