



Tagungsbericht

**Societal Conflicts:
Collective Action in an
Unequal World**

Marburg, 14. - 16.07.2022

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Report from the Conference “Societal Conflicts: Collective Action in an Unequal World,”

14.16.07.2022 at the Center for Conflict Studies, Philipps-University Marburg

By Astrid Juckenack

Over the past decades, conflict scholars have observed an increase in societal conflicts and related collective action, and economists have noted a trending increase in economic, political, and related inequalities. With these trends occurring side-by-side, questions as to their relatedness or their meanings for one another become pertinent. Yet social movements and inequality research frequently take place in separate academic spheres. The 2022 *Zentrumstage* conference sought to provide a space in which exchange could be facilitated, questions asked, and conversations started.

The conference took place between the 14th and the 16th of July 2022 at the Center for Conflict Studies, Philipps University Marburg. Around 100 participants affiliated with institutions from all over Germany or internationally, spent three days discussing excellent research on inequality, social movements, protests, and political inequalities. Across 23 presentations, scholars from all over Germany, Europe, and the world shared their theoretical and empirical insights into their respective areas of research in light of the conference topic. The conference further brought together researchers in different phases of their respective careers, ranging from Ph.D. and postdoc projects, participants from graduate schools, as well as input from more senior scholars. For junior and senior scholars alike, this further enriched the conference. The panels covered a wide variety of subjects, such as socio-economic inequalities; gender-focused and feminist perspectives; and overall questions of transition, resistance, or uprising on different levels of action and by different actor groups; environmental conflicts. Two roundtables further ‘pulled together’ the scope of the conference: one by addressing the roles conflict studies could play in tackling social inequalities, the other by its discussion of social consequences brought about by the war in Ukraine in the region, which addressed the contemporary, critical developments of the conflict. The conference hence brought together researchers from a plethora of disciplines, theoretical and methodological interests, and regional focuses, and aimed to provide a space within which these scholars could meet, exchange views and ideas, and identify shared interests.

On the first day of the conference, Susanne Buckley-Zistel, director of the Center for Conflict Studies, welcomed the participants, and Felix Anderl summarized the main relevance and connectedness of the conference’s leading topics.

The first two panels, taking place simultaneously, both shone a light on topics of action and mobilization in the context of inequalities. The **first panel**, Socio-Economic, and Political Inequalities: Civil Society and Social Movements, was chaired by Sara Kolah Ghoutschi (Philipps University

Marburg). Miriam Tekath (Marburg University) acted as discussant. Eva Willems and Pia Falschebner (Philipps University Marburg), presented their paper titled *Socio-Economic and Political Inequalities as Part of a Transitional Justice Agenda: Insights from Guatemala and Morocco*. Throughout transitional justice processes, victims' organizations articulate their needs and demands differently, but how they frame socio-economic and political inequalities remains less well-known. In Guatemala, indigenous and women's rights organizations also called for reparations for socio-economic violations and addressed structural inequalities, whereas the structural inequalities that emerged during the 'years of lead' in Morocco are not met with the same extent of demands but instead focus on political shifts and accountability measures. The varying success of reparation measures enacted in both countries hence underscores the importance of framing demands, including addressing socio-economic inequalities, in the transitional justice process. Next, John Yajalin (University of Bayreuth) presented his paper "*We Need Our Fair Share of the National Cake*": *Exploring the Collective Actions and Politics of Basic Amenities in Agbogbloshie, Ghana*. Building on research on rural-urban migration patterns in Ghana, the paper identified the collective action by which people living in impoverished settlements secure the day-to-day provision with basic supplies, avoid eviction from the settlement areas, and advocate for longer-term solutions to secure their stay. Lastly, Michael Lieber Cobb's (University of Freiburg) presentation - *Fix the Country or Fix Yourself? Protest Against Socio-Economic Inequalities by Fix the Country Movement, Ghana* – focused on another Ghanaian case study took at its point of departure the acclaim of Ghana's democracy, the simultaneous state of widespread poverty and increasing inequality, and the Ghanaian state's attempts to mend this issue via additional taxation. From these conditions emerged the civic movement 'Fix the Country.' While the government puts the responsibility back on the civilian population, it also hinders attempts at improvement by neglecting the roots of critique. Hence, the panel brought together three case studies focusing on mobilization in civic groups, though affected by a wide range of disparity, and illustrate actors' agency in mobilizing against and framing the issues they face.

The **second panel**, *Gender Inequality, and Feminist Movements*, was chaired by Myriell Fußer (Marburg University). The speakers discussed women's collective agency in the context of, respectively, negotiation and conflict resolution, traditional leadership institutions, and environmental protection movements. In doing so, these presentations also highlighted both women's presence in spaces and conflicts that are frequently male-dominated or perceived as male spheres of action, as well as the value of introducing a feminist analytical framework to conflictual encounters in a wide scope of histories and regions. Ariadna Petri (Complutense University of Madrid) gave a talk entitled *Negotiating in the Feminine*, in which she laid out gendered patterns encountered in second-track negotiations conducted in the Israel-Palestine conflict. She emphasized the importance of including both male and female participation in all layers of negotiations, including

at the semi-formal level of the second track, and further including traits typically considered feminine in these processes. Following this initial presentation, Cori Wielenga (University of Pretoria) presented an excerpt of her work, titled *Women Traditional Leaders in South Africa: Collective Action to Transform the Institution of Traditional Leadership*. Employing a perspective informed by African feminism, she gave insights into women traditional leaders' organizations as they aim to transform a highly patriarchal system towards greater equity and equality. Dorothea Hamilton and Sina Troelenberg (Justus Liebig University Gießen), finally, presented their research titled *Feminist Arguments for Defending Woodland Against Large-Scale Infrastructure Protests*, in which they applied an ecofeminist lens to the protests in the German Dannenroder Forst, highlighting protestors' rejection of hierarchical and patriarchal structures in their resistance against environmental exploitation. Mariel Reiss (Marburg University) contributed to the panel in her role as discussant, pointing out the possible value of employing a more nuanced conceptualization of the term *gender* by deviating from the focus on men/women, male/female as constituting a binary. Further, this could also be applied to some of the other concepts referred to by the speakers, such as war and peace, tradition and modernity, and humans and nature, or by putting a greater focus on intersectional analysis. The audience expressed interest and appreciation for these topics as well, as was reflected by avid questions and comments.

Embedded in the conference were two keynote lectures, that took place following each other on consecutive days. The first day of the conference concluded with **the first keynote**, titled *Protest and Inequality*, delivered by Priska Daphi (Bielefeld University), and moderated by Felix Anderl (Marburg University). Priska Daphi asked whether social inequality triggers protests, and what protests it may trigger in particular. The lecture provided an overview and comparative qualitative analysis of the interrelation of these phenomena, and factors relevant for explaining participation in protests, and posed that data protest be disaggregated beyond the national level, as protesting demographics, causes, and their relation to the political system in place can vary significantly. Globally, the 2010s have oft emerged as a 'decade of protest', and protests regarding emergent issues such as the Covid-19 pandemic have sparked further protests in the 2020s so far. Given the social and economic crises ensuing thusly, there was a heightened need to study potential links between inequality and protest in more depth. On Friday, the conference commenced with the **second keynote** by Nils Wiedmann (Konstanz University), moderated by Miquel Pellicer (Marburg University). Nils Weidmann gave a lecture titled *How Spatial Data Can Improve Comparative Research. Inequality and Conflict*. This lecture introduced the audience to different forms of spatial data and some of the limits and potentials of this data. The focus on light emission as a possible variable signifying wealth across countries illustrated this, as well as how the combination of data and the inclusion of surveys allow for a yet more nuanced perspective. Hence, surveying a population's perception of perceived

inequality could supplement indicators on the unequal distribution of wealth derived from spatial data, and allows for inquiries on how this sparks grievances or how likely protest is to occur. The two keynotes hence pointed toward the core themes of the conference, and with their qualitative and quantitative methodological focus, respectively, were able to meet the diverse audience where they were, introducing some to topics and approaches they were not particularly familiar with, whilst highlighting the relevance and potential of varied and complex approaches.

Panels three and four looked at cases and trends revolving around the transformation of conflicts, movements, and concepts, as well as on environmental conflicts in particular. Hence, one panel was wider in scope, inviting a broader audience, whereas the other one spoke to a more defined yet also timely field. **Panel three**, *Transition, Transformation, Resistance*, was chaired by Irem Aki and discussed by Stéphane Voell (both Marburg University). The panelists offered insights into protest and transitional movements from different case studies. Filipp Semyonov's (Marburg University) presentation titled *Narratives of "Social Inequality" and "Violence Against the State" in Authoritarian Regimes* focused on the protests in Kazakhstan which primarily took place during two weeks in January 2022, resulting in substantial loss of life and material damage. During this time, the violent eruptions challenged the stability of the state, and a narrative analysis revealed that the state-offered narrative of terrorist violence targeting the state was opposed to the oppositional narrative according to which the state exercised repression against the population. Further, state narratives sought to establish the unity of the state and use violence to consolidate authoritarian power. In her talk *Challenging Inequalities? Pockets of Emancipatory Worldmaking in Tunisia*, Mariam Salehi (Free University Berlin) talked about the potential for overcoming the hierarchies prevalent in a post-empirical world. Using the Ben Youssef family's struggle in the court system, embedded in frames of third-world solidarity and anticolonial struggles, and the supposedly more technocratic truth and dignity commission, which through reparation demands also challenges the former colonial powers and institutions of new imperialism, as focal points, there may be room within technocratic structures and practices for emancipatory worldmaking. This leaves room for further exploration. Lastly, Werner Distler (then Marburg University, currently Groningen University) gave his talk, *Navigating Societal Conflicts, Inequality, and the "Captured State": The Path of Vetëvendosje From Protest Movement to Government Party in Kosovo*. Vetëvendosje, self-determination, emerged as a grassroots movement but ultimately came to constitute a government obtaining an absolute majority, and hence presents an intriguing case for studying how successful protest movements navigate their position and uphold their strategies when they become government agents. Notably, a major shift took place relating to the movement's stance on negotiations, though over an extended period, from being strictly opposed to the prospect during the times of the protest movements, to favoring negotiations with Serbia as a government party. This illustrates that while the content or

core messages of a movement do not immediately need to shift following a transition, protest movements need to adapt to being able to enact solutions when they become government agents rather than 'only' take an ideological stance. Hence, the speakers all highlighted frictions not only between protesters and governments but also conflictual elements and opportunities within movements.

Panel four, Environmental Conflicts, was chaired by Johanna Kocks (Marburg University) and featured presentations illuminating challenges of protest and resistance against repression in the context of environmental struggle and exploitation. Burcu Binbuğa (Humboldt University) spoke about the long-term protest against mining endeavors in Artvin, Turkey, in a paper titled *Struggle for Environmental Commons in the Countryside in Turkey*, which has persisted despite Turkey's government growing increasingly authoritarian. She hence argues that as power relations grow more rigid and authoritarian, environmental protests can function as a field where protest is still, or newly, possible. Mathias Krams (University of Vienna) gave a talk titled *Contested Mobility Turnaround: Inequalities, Their Hegemonic Embeddedness and Resistant Collective Action*. His talk focused on protests in Germany and Austria in particular and sought to build a hypothesis on a relation between inequality and mobilization. Finally, Jan Sändig, Jana Hönke, and Claude Kabemba (University of Bayreuth) presented part of the research conducted in the context of the ERC INFRAGLOB project "Africa's Infrastructure Globalities," asking in their title *When Do They Concede? Chinese Mining Companies and Public Protest in Africa*. They posit that while Chinese mining companies likely foresaw grievances among the population in DR Congo, they did not expect that those would result in protest, owing to the repressive government. However, through complex relations and organization of civil society actors, advocacy is taking place nevertheless. Discussant on this panel was Felix Anderl (Marburg University), who posed three questions tying together central themes and questions of the presentations. As they all employ a framework of social movements, how useful is this lens for the study of environmental questions? He further pointed towards the common denominator of environmental protests occurring vis-à-vis companies, and lastly, the role of emotions and affects for such protests. The subsequent discussion and questions from the audience further brought the topic of structural transformation to the table, and the long-term transformations these protests can achieve, as well as transnational mobilization and cooperation.

Friday's **lunch break** further served as a meeting slot for the Norm Research Group gathering at the Center for Conflict Studies regularly, which has formed at the Center for Conflict Studies and related projects and meets semi-regularly to discuss shared research interests. The group thus also benefitted from the interaction facilitated by the wider conference setting.

Panels five and six were about the psychological dimensions of protest as well as mobilization in the context of membership or belonging to a dominant structure. Across panels, themes of privilege but also the recognition of specific vulnerabilities emerged. **Panel five**, *Psychological Dimensions of Inequality and Collective Action*, was chaired by Alina Giesen (Philipps University Marburg) and discussed by Miquel Pellicer (Philipps University Marburg). Its featured presentations put the focus on psychological and individual components of protest, mobilization, and activism – the psychological drivers of action, allyship, and individual advocacy. Anna-Lena Hönig and Roman Krtsch (Konstanz University) asked how prominent public figures can affect protest, i.e., whether and how they can contribute to the formation of crowds and public displays of protest, in their paper *Personalizing Mobilization: The Impact of Public Figures in Protest Events* and suggest that this may well be the case. Next, Frank Eckerle (Philipps University Marburg) presented a project participated in by, but not also presented by, Maja Kutlaca, Patrick F. Kotzur, Merve Ozturk & Faruk Saglamoz (Durham University). *Confronting With Intersectional Privilege and Its Effect on Political Solidarity*. Thus, while privileges are often seen as lone-standing attributes, an increased awareness of the impact of privilege can make displays of solidarity more likely, though it can also feed into protectiveness and resentment. The authors propose a greater emphasis on intersectionality to highlight the systemic nature of different kinds of privilege, and to use intersectional interventions to increase solidarity and allyship. Thirdly, Ruth Murambadoro (York University) highlighted the experiences of victims oft left out of the Zimbabwean peacebuilding process, which primarily aims to reconcile state actors and political opposition. Poignantly, her presentation was titled “*I Am Living Through the Shadow of Death from Zimbabwe*”: *A Survivor’s Cry for Justice, Freedom and Equality in Exile*, and focuses on the narrative of a torture survivor of the post-election violence in 2008. By doing so, the paper illustrated the need for a greater focus on individual victims of the violence, and for the greater centrality of individuals within these processes.

Panel six focused on *Dominant Structures and Their Contestations*, and was chaired and discussed by Astrid Juckenack (Marburg University). Bret McEvoy (University of Erfurt) presented a paper titled „*Taking Responsibility for the (White) Collective*“: *A Conceptual Model for Implicated Subjects in Transformative Justice* based on his doctoral thesis. He focused on anti-racist white activists’ engagement with the United State’s history of racism and oppression. They are conceptualized as ‘implicated subjects’, following Michael Rothberg, whose identity benefits from and enforces an oppressive system without their active participation, and who can exercise collective agency to disrupt these patterns. They do this, taking up and expanding Wendy Lambourne’s notions of transformative justice, via the internalization of collective responsibility, approaches favoring relational over legalistic accountability, socioeconomic justice, and envisioning responsible institutions other than the State. Anne Menzel’s (Free University Berlin) presentation was based on

an article entitled *Activism, Professionalism, Tensions, and Combinations: Modes of Struggle in a Projectized World*. Scholarship frequently identifies professionalized work and grassroots movements as two 'sides' conducting advocacy work. These are understood to work in relation to, and influence, each other, with the funding of professionalized movements sometimes depending on their interaction with grassroots organizations. However, this perspective leaves the two as distinct – as interacting but ultimately two separate categories. There are, however, instances where professionalized actors take on informal roles, and interpret their duties towards the project as well as the people whom the projects are meant to serve independently, to circumvent some of the bureaucratic restrictions for the benefit of the targeted population. Hence, a more complex view of these dynamics would be desirable for future research. Astrid Juckenack's comments raised points on intersectionality and gender, as well as regarding whether large-scale institutions could also tolerate bureaucratic flaws to leave space for on-the-ground interpretation. The audience became involved in these discussions as well, further reflecting on the differences between activists and professionals, and the boundaries of these roles.

Friday's conference program concluded with the **roundtable** *What Role Can Conflict Studies Play in Tackling Social Inequalities?* Felix Anderl moderated a discussion between Alexander de Juan, Caroline Fehl, Katja Freistein, Josh Platzky Miller, and Tareq Sydiq. During the roundtable, the discussion centered around multiple focal points – the constructive and conflictual roles conflict research can take on in the context of practice, but also the inequality and power imbalances running through the academic context within which this research is produced.

Alexander de Juan (Osnabrück University) posited that while we as peace and conflict researchers and practitioners can write reports and propose courses of action, the content of these publications frequently differs from the prevalent understanding of the causes of and solutions of conflict in development organizations. Where scholarly evaluations deviate from popular assumptions, this may not always be accepted or may be difficult to integrate into an organization's project work. Caroline Fehl (Peace Research Institute Frankfurt) further pointed toward the challenges of making inequality a focal point within frameworks where efficiency is the actual starting point. On the terminology of diversity and inequality, Katja Freistein (Helmut-Schmidt-University & Käthe Hamburger Kolleg/ Center for Global Cooperation Research) argued that speaking of the two terms in the university context as well does not render those terms the same. Hence, universities should not use the two terms exchangeable, and creating greater diversity is not necessarily tied to an attempt to dismantle unequal structures. Josh Platzky Miller (University of KwaZulu-Natal) explained that the education system tends to reproduce class hierarchies, but can also serve as a space of contestation thereof. At the same time, how these organizations – universities but also related systems, such as the academic

publishing industry – are structured also hinders attempts to disrupt the system and work towards in-depth change. Additionally, Tareq Sydiq (Marburg University) raised the point of knowledge production and the importance that researchers consider who is using their research and how it might be implemented, as well as the issues with increasing institutional diversity by tapping competent researchers who leave institutions of their home countries. In their questions and comments, the audience further commented on academia's structural hurdles in tackling inequalities but also questioned whether and where to draw a line between inequality and justice. The panel hence provided a critical look not primarily at the contexts featured *in* conflict research, but at the hierarchies and structures within which researchers and their work are embedded and that researchers themselves reproduce.

Two parallel panels occupied the penultimate timeslot on Saturday morning. They focused, respectively, on the actions and agency of groups, one with an emphasis on armed actors, the other focusing on social uprisings and political actors. In different ways, these can address prevailing inequalities and grievances, but they may also be in positions where strategic adaption is required.

Panel seven, *Armed Groups and Inequality*, was chaired by Stefanie Wesch (Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research) and discussed by Anika Oettler (Philipps University Marburg). First was Nicholas Pope's (King's College London) presentation *Militias Go Rogue: Dealing With Social Dilemmas in Rio de Janeiro's Urban Frontier*. By addressing and responding to inequalities, militia groups can gain public standing and use this as an entry point to politics. Next, Evelyn Mejía Carrasco (Autonomous University of Guerrero) proposed an understanding of violence as relational, deriving meaning from power relations, resources, and historical entanglements. Hence, her talk titled *Contrasted Experiences: A Proposal for the Micro Regional Analysis of Violence, Subjectivities and Conflict* focused on the struggles of indigenous actors in Mexico around wind turbine projects in Oaxaca State. Maria Ketzmerick's (University of Bayreuth) presentation *The Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon: Local Conflict, Global Competition, and Transnational Rebel Governance* finally took a closer look at the transnationalization of the conflict in Cameroon, which has increased in intensity since 2017 and in which actors have become increasingly muddled. As movements become more fragmented in a transnationalized conflict, the likelihood with which they will use violence or resort to more peaceful means of negotiation also varies. The panel thus presented a myriad of actors and the ways their relation to different communities, local and international, with diverging or overlapping interests, impacts their courses of action.

The eighth panel, *Violence and Social Uprising*, was chaired by Sophie Falschebner (Marburg University). The panel brought together perspectives on the actors and ideology of social movement actors, their ability to adapt, and their use of marginal spaces of expression. Helen L. Murphey

(University of St. Andrews) presented her talk titled *Reframing Ideology and Grievance: The Formation of Revolutionary Populist Salafism*, with case studies focusing on Egypt and Tunisia, both of which present (post-)revolutionary settings. Within this context, present Salafi movements had to make adaptations to their ideology and identity, a change towards which she puts attention in her research. The adaptations that the movements in either country underwent appear to be in contradiction to assumptions typically held about Salafist Islam, and in places appear in contradiction with one another. However, in each country, respectively, adapting their ideology allowed these movements to speak to the needs expressed by members of the broader population, and hence to remain relevant in their respective contexts. Tareq Sydiq (Marburg University) presented his recently published monograph, titled *Political Participation in Authoritarian and Semi-Democratic Contexts in Iran*. He illuminated ways of articulating political interests in a state that is frequently oppressive and violent towards critics and exercises a large amount of control in many spheres of public and private life. However, people in Iran could often make use of in-between spaces. Meanwhile, the presence of these spaces can be used not only to challenge the government and strengthen its opposition but can further take on a stabilizing function, providing a limited outlet for grievances. Susanne Buckley-Zistel (Marburg University) acted as discussant. The discussion following the presentations, as well as questions posed by the audience, revolved around (transnational) entanglements, forging public appeal and legitimacy, everyday resistance, as well as the interactions of (violent) repression and regime stability.

Finally, the concluding session of the conference was a second roundtable, moderated by Thorsten Bonacker (Philipps University Marburg), titled *The War in Ukraine: Social Consequences in the Region*. This roundtable aimed to address the pervasive topic that is the recently escalated armed conflict, with perspectives from Ukraine and the region, the distinct effects on and challenges of neighboring and politically intertwined countries. The guests shared their expertise on respective regions, Vera Rogova (Peace Research Institute Frankfurt) on Eastern Europe, Filipp Semyonov (Philipps University Marburg) provided insights on Kazakhstan, Kristine Avram (Philipps University Marburg) on Romania, Philipp Lottholz (Philipps University Marburg) on Bulgaria, Stéphane Voell (Philipps University Marburg) on the Caucasus region, and Yulia Kurnyshova (Taras Shevchenko National University, Kyiv) on Ukraine. The diversity of perspectives allowed for a nuanced and complex perspective on the war in Ukraine and its effects both on Ukraine and Ukrainians, but also on the manifold ways in which the region and its people are affected, politically, economically, and individually.

Throughout the panels, keynotes, and roundtables, but also in conversations during breaks and after the core program, it became clear how relevantly connected the fields of inequality and social movements indeed are, and how fruitful a more conscious effort to connect them truly is. Rising

levels of inequality as well as the prevalence of protest movements both in authoritarian regimes as well as in consolidated democracies may not inherently, barring a conscious effort, speak to each other, and the *Zentrumstage* conference made a successful effort to bridge this gap. We owe our thanks and gratitude to the presenters and attendees of the conference, who shared valuable insights into their research and discipline and were crucial to bringing about the fruitful and stimulating atmosphere of the conference. We thank the chairs for their interaction with participants and their summaries of the panels, the discussants for their thoughtful input and engagement with the presentations, and Alina Giesen and Nilgün Yelpaze for protocolling much of the event. We are further immensely grateful to the German Foundation for Peace Research (DSF), whose funding made this conference possible, as well as to the student assistants, researchers, and organizers at the Center for Conflict Studies, who were vital to this endeavor. The *Zentrumstage* have taken place at the Center for Conflict Studies every two years since 2004, in varying formats and covering a wide variety of topics and participants. We are happy to have had the opportunity to contribute to this tradition and are certain that we will continue to see the format thrive going forward.