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Feminist Activism and Solidarity across Borders. Chandra Talpade Mohanty in Conversation with Nikita Dhawan – Panel Debate and Book Launch.

Event Report

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Feminist Activism and Solidarity across Borders.
Chandra Talpade Mohanty in Conversation with Nikita Dhawan

Abstract

On May 27, 2019, two widely known and recognised feminist theorists, Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Nikita Dhawan, came together in Vienna to discuss issues of transnational solidarity among feminist, queer, anti-racist, anti-capitalist and social justice struggles. Chandra Talpade Mohanty presented her latest book and digital archive project, co-edited with Linda E. Carty, called 'Feminist Freedom Warriors: Genealogies, Justice, Politics, and Hope' as a cross-generational conversation with feminist scholar-activists and sister comrades about their activist works and struggles for social justice. Giving insights into the idea and motivation of the project, Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Nikita Dhawan not only addressed the meaning of central concepts such as solidarity, political friendship and wonderful thinking, but also touched upon the question of the state as well as 'why feminism is important to all of this'. This report outlines central issues discussed during the event and identifies possible points of departure for transnational solidarity amongst feminists.

Keywords: transnational feminism, solidarity, intersectionality, activism, feminist struggles

Author Information: The discussion was transcribed and summarised by Ines Höckner and Lan Huong Le, both graduate students of Development Studies at the University of Vienna. Ines Höckner's research interests focus on materialist and critical-realist perspectives on nation, gender and racism in authoritarian neoliberalism, and Lan Huong Le's research centres around materialist feminism, reproductive labour, global health, and reproductive health.

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Event Report

On May 27, 2019, Chandra Talpade Mohanty came together with Nikita Dhawan to discuss issues of transnational solidarity among feminist, queer, anti-racist, anti-capitalist and social justice struggles. The event took place at the ceremonial hall of the Sigmund Freud University in Vienna and was joined by more than 200 friends and colleagues. Chandra Talpade Mohanty presented her latest book and digital archive project, co-edited with Linda E. Carty, called 'Feminist Freedom Warriors: Genealogies, Justice, Politics, and Hope' as a cross-generational conversation with feminist scholar-activists and sister comrades about their activist works and struggles for social justice. The panel debate was organised by Frauen*solidarität in cooperation with Brot für die Welt, Frauenhetz, Gender and Agency, Gender and Transformation, the Gender Research Office, the Vienna Institute for International Dialogue and Cooperation (VIDC), the Entwicklungspolitisches Netzwerk für Frauenrechte und feministische Perspektiven (WIDE-Network), as well as the Department of African Studies, the Department of Development Studies and the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology from the University of Vienna.

Nikita Dhawan is a Professor of Political Science and Gender Studies at the University of Giessen in Germany since October 2018. From 2008 to 2014, she was a Junior Professor of Gender and Postcolonial Studies and Director of the Frankfurt Research Center for Postcolonial Studies at the Goethe University Frankfurt. She was a University Professor of Political Theory and Gender Studies and Director of the Research Platform Gender Studies: 'Identities – Discourses – Transformations' at the University of Innsbruck from 2014 to 2018. Her research interests focus on transnational feminism, global justice, human rights, democracy, and decolonisation.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty is a Distinguished Professor of Women's and Gender Studies and Dean's Professor of the Humanities, Syracuse University. She is most known for her essay 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses' (1984), where she criticises the political project of 'Western' feminism and its discursive construction of the category of the 'Third World Women' as a homogenous entity. Her work focuses on transnational feminist theory, anti-capitalist feminist praxis, anti-racist education, and the politics of knowledge. Central to Talpade Mohanty's transnational mission is the project of building non-colonising feminist solidarity across borders to an intersectional analysis of race, nation, colonialism, sexuality, class, and gender.

Mohanty's latest book and digital archive project 'Feminist Freedom Warriors: Genealogies, Justice, Politics, and Hope' was starting point of the conversation with Nikita Dhawan. The following outlines the central issues discussed and allows a glimpse into Mohanty's newest work on transborder feminism.

Nikita Dhawan (ND): Given the current political climate, issues that we hope to address today are not just academically important but also politically urgent. How to build alliances across borders without entrenching hegemonic feminist agendas or paternalising those interpellated as receivers of solidarity? What challenges do postcolonial, decolonial, queer feminists face in reconciling the

personal with the political, the local with the global? Can norms of freedom and justice be re-appropriated from neoliberal and neo-conservative forces? What kind of epistemological insights and ethical practices do anti-capitalist, anti-racist feminist struggles of women of colour from the Global South draw on? How is transnational feminist politics transformed through engagement with postcolonial and decolonial feminist genealogies and intersectional methodology? (…) Let us start with a very simple question. As this is an occasion to discuss the book 'Feminist Freedom Warriors: Genealogies, Justice, Politics, and Hope' and, as you mentioned, the book is anchored in an ongoing digital archive project committed to anti-capitalist, anti-racist, feminist struggles which has been an ongoing thread throughout your work - academic and also your political work. Could you tell us a little bit more about the project? (…)

Chandra Talpade Mohanty (CTM): So, the book is really not about me or my work. It is about the work of a group of feminists who come from all kinds of different places in the world, [who think] deeply about what it means to do radical feminist work – which is anti-racist, anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist – to whom those projects are connected and have been a lifelong passion. In fact, it is a project that has no official funding. We began four years ago, and it is a labour of love. We began four years ago saying, 'we need the stories, that we already know and that sister comrades have told us, to be out in the world for other people and different generations to hear and to know'. (…) Linda Carty is my comrade in this project, I could not do this without her and without all the other people that work with us. This is a preview [Mohanty showed a video with clips of the various conversations she and Linda Carty had with various feminist activists and scholars]:

> What we have in common is being women of colour from the Global South who were immigrants in this country and who grew up within an academy, right, and within feminist narratives that were not necessarily our own. So, we had to find them. We had to find the genealogies that then we needed to claim. So, we had to both find them and claim them. And so, this project – the video archive project – is a way to make those multiple genealogies available. (…) And then this project for us is about in fact realising that we have had within our networks of anti-racist, 'Third World', feminist sisters, that there are a number of people who have in fact been doing knowledge production, radical knowledge production and organising, within the academy and outside. (…) So, for young radical people, part of this project is about sort of creating an imaginative communal space, where people can actually be inspired by the lives of these women and the projects that many of us are involved in, which are not so easy to construct at this time and place. (You can watch the preview video on the website: http://feministfreedomwarriors.org/watchvideo.php?firstname=FFW&lastname=Preview [accessed 03.06.2020]).

The book does not represent all the people that we would like to have on there. But to us, it is really a beginning of a project that is more accessible. It is very immature; we do not have professionals working with us or for us. We have student videographers, photographers, editors, undergraduate students, etc. So, it is a completely collaborative project. (…)

ND: To focus on the title of the book because it is very inspiring – 'Feminist Freedom Warriors'! When I first read the title, I thought it was an interesting intervention given that the category 'freedom' has been appropriated by neoliberalism and historically contaminated by its instrumentalization by

European philosophers to justify imperialism in the name of bringing the gifts of enlightenment to "barbaric" populations. So, I wonder if it is possible to resignify the term? And if yes, how to re-appropriate it for queer-feminist-postcolonial-decolonial struggles? Similarly, the term 'warrior' has this patriarchal, military connotation. So, how can one appropriate these kinds of categories for progressive, radical, feminist agendas?

CTM: That is a great question. So, you know, we observed throughout history how language, concepts, ideas can completely be re-signified, appropriated, etc. by social movements. And we are living in an age where a lot of the kind of gains of social movements have been completely appropriated and commodified. So, how does one fight that? I think, one does not fight it by giving up the terms and giving up our ideas. I think what is really important, is to draw attention to genealogies and the histories, that in fact made those ideas and terms meaningful to us. So, in terms of 'Feminist Freedom Warriors', I do not think that we want the terms to be separated. It is not feminist, freedom, warrior, it is *feminist freedom warriors*. And the genealogies, we are drawing on, are in fact genealogies of the most amazing people who have been involved in abolitionist, anti-slavery, anti-racist, queer, anti-colonial, anti-imperialist movements. So, all the way from Harriet Tubman to Audre Lorde to indigenous women chiefs like Wilma Mankiller in the U.S., who use the terms 'women warriors' or 'feminist warriors' to describe themselves. And also, I think, the term to us signifies a history of struggles that have been really keen for the way we think now. What do we mean when we think about liberation? What do we mean when we think about justice? If we do not want to cede them to the right or to the neo-fascists or to elite feminists – commodification – then we have to continuously go back to those histories and genealogies, which are connected, and which arise from a particular epistemological space, in which one critically theorises one's own experiences of exploitation, disappearance, genocide, all of those spaces, and fights against it [the appropriation and commodification of gains of social movements]. I am even thinking about the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya, where it was women warriors who fought it [the struggle]. So, there is a lot of histories like that, and I actually think that because the struggle right now is so much on discursive and ideological terms. I mean, we are listening to what is happening in Europe, we saw what happened in India. So, a lot of the struggle is around what narratives are being produced and then becoming consensual narratives that people actually think are in their own interests, whether they are or not.

ND: A follow-up question: When you wrote 'Under Western Eyes' and later responded to the critics, you were writing about the stereotyping of 'Third World Women' as mute victims without agency, unable to represent themselves. In fact, you end the essay by critiquing Marx, who famously wrote in The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte from 1853: "They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented". The idea of feminist freedom warriors is a counterpoint to the muting of the 'Third World subject'. However, this could feed into another kind of stereotype. I'm thinking about Michelle Obama, who is stereotyped as the 'angry black woman'. And how does one then…

CTM: By some people, by others she is admired as [an] icon.

ND: But this was quite a dominant stereotyping in the mainstream media. I am not just talking about Fox, but mainstream American media reinforcing the image of the 'angry black woman'. So my question is if the notion of feminist freedom warriors ruptures the stereotype of the mute woman of colour or consolidates the stereotype about Black women? Do you see a danger there or do you think that this could be subversive?

CTM: No, of course there is a danger there. But the reason the project is conceived the way it is, and what we even say in the book, really, what they say and we say – the point is these women are not extraordinary women, they are not women who represent something huge, they are actually products of their own communities and histories. And they are in conversation with each other. So, the point here is not that these are individual interviews. If you look at the format, it is very much the three of us in the space. We do very few close-ups. We had the camera just kind of sitting there. And part of that is the effort to create a space that is in fact collaborative, a communal space, so that people hear echoes. When you watch the interviews or when you talk to different people or you read about different people [you] also see the place-based knowledges that are so crucial to the way these women think. So, part of what the book is trying to do is to connect the place-based knowledges and experiences of women in movements to their strategic thinking, to the way they think about the world now, to the way they analyse neoliberalism and fascism and racism and all these different things.

ND: Another important concept you have given us is the politics of location that confronts de-territorialisation of knowledge and focuses on how certain struggles are entrenched in certain contexts and cannot be simply detached and decoupled.

CTM: So, Nikita can I just read two pages that give people a sense of 'why these women?' and what this is about?

> Our conversations with these sister comrades tell stories of politicisation, of coming to consciousness and developing revolutionary anti-capitalist feminist commitments. We believe these narratives are necessary at this historical moment as they help us sustain radical struggles against neoliberal, transnational capital, carceral, national security driven nation-states, and the rise of racist, right wing, authoritarian regimes in the USA and around the world. The seven scholar-activists featured here speak about their different and similar place-based genealogies of political engagements in anti-capitalist, anti-racist, anti-imperialist, queer, women's liberation, and indigenous feminist movements in the U.S., Canada, Mexico/Latin America, India, and the Asian and African diasporas. Individually, and collectively, these scholar-activists illustrate the deep and significant connections between the personal and the political, by 1) mapping their histories of coming of age within deeply oppressive, racist, colonialist, and hetero-patriarchal geopolitical contexts, and 2) describing their journeys within social justice movements that anchor their analytic and theoretical frameworks and vision for economic justice. (…) All seven women have been or are connected to the academy in various landscapes: Angela Y Davis, Margo Okazawa-Rey, Minnie Bruce Pratt in the U.S., Himani Banerjee in Canada and India, Amina Mama in Nigeria, the UK and South Africa and now the U.S., Aida Hernandez Castillo in Mexico, and Zillah Eisenstein. All of them have been involved in multiple social justice movements, sometimes in key-leadership roles and all have produced knowledge, that has had an impact on a broad range of individual and political projects. Archiving these stories then is a political project about challenging mainstream narratives of

feminism, of communism and the left, and mapping the complexity of identity-based social movements and of intellectual and political work in the academy.

So, I can go on, but one of the things that we really wanted to draw attention to is that this volume is as much about living a politically conscious life as theorising what happens in movements or being an activist or being a scholar or being both. And feminism is a key ingredient to this. So, there is a certain synergy that we are trying to depict here. That is very important. What you would not get, would be that there are connections among and between these women. And so, each of them was involved in struggles that in fact led them to analyses and thinking and visions of social justice that have things in common. So, that to me is the most inspiring thing about doing a project like this. Part of what we are looking for is not just that we tell different stories because we come from different places, but that in the stories we tell, we imagine a world which does not just depend on our own lives. That in fact it is all of our lives that are interconnected, and to me that is the deepest sense of solidarity which I think is very hard to achieve.

ND: Usually when one thinks about Talpade Mohanty's work or teaches Talpade Mohanty in class, the word that is often associated with your work is of course "solidarity". But I spontaneously thought of the concept of "friendship". While watching the video, reading the book and listening to you, I was struck by the longstanding friendship that you share with many of the contributors. Could you perhaps elaborate on the idea of political friendship and why it is a challenge and yet necessary in the times we live.

CTM: I actually had a student in a graduate seminar who engaged in this project together as part of the seminar, and then they wrote an essay together and they talk[ed] about epistemic friendship as political work. And it actually grows out of work in a classroom and what that actually means. And it is a really interesting and beautiful formulation, right? So, I guess we can think about this idea of political friendship as sort of the world it takes to construct one's own intellectual and political neighbourhood, which is Toni Morrison's term, which I love to use. She talked about the fact that we need to build intellectual neighbourhoods. And that notion of political or epistemic friendship is one way [to] do that. And it also a way that we, in fact, re-imagine the connection of the political and the personal, I think. So, as you said, I have always pushed back against the idea of the political can be reduced to the personal. That has always been a problem for me.

ND: Because it is so seductive. (…) It is so seductive to only be worried about your problems, because there are so many.

CTM: Yes, and there are. I completely agree. (…) So, it pushes back against that, because political friendship cannot happen unless you become literally fluid in each other's histories and genealogies and passions. Not just histories and genealogies. That is not possible until you take on your friends, connections, visions, and struggles. And that relationality, I think, is key for me also in terms of building solidarity.

ND: Do you think there are any possibilities of building political friendship with your enemies or opponents?

CTM: No. And I do not want to build political friendships with them (…) I want to have conversations with them. But if I imagined that I could build political friendships then I would need to think about middle grounds. I think in the world we live in there is no middle ground. I do not think we can occupy middle grounds right now. I think, given the social movements and forces around us, for some of the struggles we are engaged in, we need to be very clear-eyed and clear-headed about what we believe in. So no, I do not know about the echo chamber stuff because I think that we need to be in spaces where people have the same values, so that we actually do not think we are mad, you know, or going crazy. So, we need those spaces. But we cannot remain in those spaces. If you remain in those spaces then it is almost like you are paying no attention to any kind of differences in anything, including ideological and political differences. So, I think we need to find ways to have conversations and to listen and to be in spaces where we actually create certain kinds of conversations. But political friendships, I do not see how [to build those] unless there were personal friendships. Personal friendships yes, because (…) I have a family where most of them, I am completely ideologically opposed to. (…) But first of all, you love them, and you cannot dismiss them. You just find ways to have the conversations when you can. And I do this in my family. A lot of people thought I was completely crazy: 'What is Women's Studies?' For my generation of Indians, for instance. But now they are at a point where they are actually telling me about women's empowerment. It is not quite feminism, but it is women's empowerment. (…) I think also sometimes, we do not give ourselves enough credit for actually being in spaces where we are able to stretch the borders of what is being discussed. And to me, the classroom is really one such space where you can create a community of learners. Where we are able to relate differently and imagine something together. (…) This is something that I think Margo Okazawa-Rey says about the fact that we need 'wonderful thinking'. You need thinking full of wonder, and how do you get that. And why is that so necessary, that people have yearning for this kind of thinking and imagining of communities. (…)

ND: I have a couple of more questions. I am intrigued with the ambivalent relation that emancipatory social movements and protest politics have to the state. Many of the contributors have an anti-state position and I am fascinated by Michel Foucault's warning about the risks of state-phobia. Do you think that the coercive functions of the state can function as weapon of the weak?

CTM: So, there are no easy answers, obviously. I think we engage in our own deconstruction of the state as feminists. Which does not mean we engage in the necessarily easy abolition of the state. But, first of all, this notion of the critique of the state and the conversions of right wing and sometimes left progressive movements [often pay no] attention to (…) how significant gender is in the midst of all of this – in both directions. So, one of the things that I think we can contribute as feminists – and I think there is a lot of people doing this work, amazing work – on how in fact gender and ideas, patriarchal traditional ideas are sometimes, or most times, undergirding (…) the Alt Right, Hindutva,

etc. (…) So there is this piece. Then, the other piece is the racism piece, which is that which fuels islamophobia, it fuels anti-migrant sentiments, racist sentiments, all of this. Therefore, as scholar activist, it is again politics of location; I cannot answer as a philosopher. From where I sit, what is possible for me to do, is to work alongside feminist scholars who are really talking about what I think Cindi Katz called a 'counter topography'. Where you acknowledge first of all that gender and 'race' is key to the way these mobilisations are happening in relation to the state. Because the state itself, all state governance, involves discourses of gender, and class, and race, ability, sexuality, etc. (…) The last decades of feminist scholarship has shown this. So, I think we do pay attention to that, (…) to how states manoeuvre and exercise violence at all different levels. And [we] organise movements which are already organised at the ground against those forms of violence. So, what would a counter topography of state violence look like across borders? It would mean taking particular impact of policies, ideologies, etc. In India it would be about what is going on with Dalits (untouchables) and Muslims; in Europe it would be about what is going on with migrants and Muslims, etc. (…); and in the US, well you know, there are the same actors there. (…) Look at all this in terms of understanding how state violence interacts, or is responsible, or impacts particular communities and spaces, and then see what there is in common and what movements have already discovered in common. So, I think that two things [are important]: The world we are living in now is organised through nation states, so we cannot pretend they do not exist. We can in fact take seriously the question of what citizenship might mean if it was not organised in the way nation states organise it. So, questions of citizenship, belonging, insider-outsider, all become really key. (…) Again, it is about producing counter-hegemonic knowledges and counter-hegemonic strategies on the ground, drawing on different histories and genealogies that had to be necessarily erased and disappeared in order for the commonsensical narratives to work the way they work right now.

ND: We have examples like Aam Aadmi Party in India and Podemos in Spain, both of which started as social movements and both are now ruling parties that are struggling with rethinking questions of citizenship, political participation, popular sovereignty and so on. So the relation between social movements, protest politics and the state seems to be deeply ambivalent.

CTM: Yes, certainly it is important to have the counter movements like Podemos.

ND: May I just intervene? Just one more thing: If you think about refugees, people without papers, stateless people, many of them want to 'belong'. As you said, we live in a system, which is organised around nation states. As Hannah Arendt rightly pointed out that if one does not belong to a political community, you are stripped of the "right to have rights". So the anarchist hope that the world's problems will vanish if we abolish state system is disingenuous.

CTM: Right. Here is my point: Why is feminism important in all of this, is a question I would ask. And it is a question I would ask in terms of whether progressive political organisations that end up becoming parties and making a play for the state necessarily pay attention to what it is that feminist insights can offer. And this is one thing that is always missing is this notion of the 'personal is political'

– the significance of identities and the significance of connection between and among people. I do not think that just a platform stated in a really visionary and seductive way actually gets us to where we want to get eventually. It is a lot of hard work. This is why Black Lives Matter (BLM) movements and some other movements to me are so amazing. Because there is a lot of thought put into how to organise and what it means to create relationships, friendships and accountability. That is on terms derived from feminist, and queer, and black and POC movements, and that does not exist in a lot of the political parties that we are talking about. So, we are not changing anything. It is like Amina said, people are formed within movements and we have to change ourselves within movements, what are we actually thinking about how we change ourselves within movements. And this is a separate thing from the idea of 'let's all do self-care'. I mean, let us do self-care but let it not be our politics only. (…)

ND: Now my last question on issue of solidarity. You propose solidarity across borders, but how to build alliance across borders and transnational solidarity without – and this is something that has frequently happened in the last decades – the appropriation of grassroots women's movements by elite feminist agendas? Also, a certain de-politicisation takes place when local languages and vernacular vocabularies are translated into universal agendas. For instance, in the context of development politics, wherein the asymmetries of power – the non-reciprocity between the Global North and the Global South is deeply entrenched, how does one pursue non-imperialist solidarity across borders?

CTM: I think there are layers to how one does this. The first is how we are thinking about it. And this is why for me producing the knowledge and understanding what is going on is key to any thinking about what needs to be done. (…) I just take this question of within development politics, which is a concrete question. Solidarity involves mutuality, involves accountability, involves being in the position of a learner across borders of all kinds. All of those are givens to me. You cannot build solidarity that is not within a colonialist frame unless you do this work. That is the work (…) of creating partnerships and not saviours, not seeing yourself as a saviour. I think for many of us in the last 20-30 years that work has been a struggle, to actually do work across borders. But not just solidarity within and across cultural work, also knowledge production across borders which is a decolonised space where knowledge is about decolonising power and relationships that are unequal. So, how we think about it and whether we can actually imagine partnerships in which we are not knowers, in which the people we work with are not just the objects of the work we do, or even just the subjects, but that the relationship is what is significant. After that, we have to think about strategies and praxis. And all of these can only be talked about in the context itself.

Therefore, a good way to think about it is, for instance, when people talk about building solidarity around sexual violence or violence against women, which as you know is obviously one of the largest sorts of concerns right now, feminist concerns right now around the world. So, if in the Global North we talk about strategies or movements against sexual violence in one way, and we talk about it in a different way in the Global South, this always leads to a kind of stereotype. For instance, a good example is the young woman, Emma Sulkowicz, in the US. She was a Columbia student and

had a mattress project, she carried a mattress on her back to protest her rape throughout her graduation. She went up on stage and built an entire movement around this in fact. A large number of women and men carried mattresses. This was her senior project, and a lot of the analyses of it talked about it as a challenge to rape culture and harassment on campuses.

Then you had this episode in India where the woman eventually died. There people then talked about it as (…) a level of misogyny and murder that only traditional backward cultures can engage in. Instead of that, what if we were to talk about this as a continuum, as comparing cultures and not use terms which are different, but where you actually can start seeing what women and marginalised groups, transwomen - especially trans-black-women - in a lot of different countries experience. That level of state violence can be seen in other spaces and understood comparatively so that we can in fact grasp what solidarity might mean, rather than coming up with our own rather elitist analyses and understandings. Let us talk about the fact that solidarity itself becomes commodified – and has been in neoliberal times. So, people in the West or people in the North can now show solidarity by buying products that are made by people in the South. This does not mean that you should not do that, it means that this is not really changing anybody's lives here, except making you feel you are in solidarity. It is the same kind of thing, when we sign petitions online, which is I think important to do, and crucial, but they do not stand in for the hard work that solidarity actually takes. So, I think that the only way to fight back against a lot of the commercialisation and the commodification of a number of these ideas and concepts and even practices is literally to be constantly pointing out what is wrong here and to show other forms of solidarity which exist right now.

There is some amazing work happening in the US-Mexican border. I was just there and in conversations with a lot of the feminists and immigrant-right activists there. And on both sides of the border there are connections and communities being built by the coordinated actions where the ideas do not come from one direction. The ideas flow in both directions and people who have privilege, like people who have a platform, are able to mobilise the media in ways, that people on the other side cannot. You have artists at the border now creating artwork that draws attention to what the incredible level of violence that the state, the US, is exercising at the border. Just reading that does not do what a lot of the activism and a lot of the cultural work is doing right now. Actually, I think, cultural artists and cultural workers in many different spaces are doing a lot of the most exciting solidarity work across borders. (…)

So, the rest you have to read.

Revised and summarised by Ines Höckner and Lan Huong Le