Political Settlements Transformation: Engagement with the Unpredictable?

Jan Pospisil, PSRP, Edinburgh Law School

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Outline

(1) Overview of the “political settlements” (PS) concept and presently suggested ways of application in research and policy

(2) Conceptualizing PS as *unpredictable* complex social systems

(3) Agency and institutions as key elements of PS transformation

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“Political Settlements”

• critical thinking on statehood in “limited access orders” (North)
• product of an “era of disillusionment” (Bell) in international peace- and statebuilding
• various definitions – common denominator: in/formal elite bargaining (eg Di John/Putzel)
• used on various scales, from almost longue durée to concrete power configurations

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Political Settlements and Fragility

• PS in place to “tame politics” (Rocha Menocal), cannot achieve this when “in crisis” (Khan) ⇔ situations of violent conflict and fragility;

• However, PS concept not normative; offers analytical opportunities:
  • violent conflict not a “defect” (as in idealistic peace-building), but potential part of statebuilding;
  • PS offers opportunity to deal with fragility as a state of transformation and fluidity (contradicting prevalent ideas of “fixing” and “stabilizing”).

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Modes of Engagement

- Uptake in policy: attempts of technocratic normative reframing, re-relating to assumptions from “liberal peacebuilding”
- “legitimate PS” ⇔ “inclusive PS”
  - in agenda setting (PSG1 / SDG16)
  - in donor activities (support for inclusion, also by coercive means; empowerment of civil society and opposition actors; mediation actors; “normative space”, Jones et al.)
- Often catch-22: aiming at stabilization strengthens a constellation that is a structural cause of the problem
- empirical evidence weak (tautological pitfalls)

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Complexity and Unpredictability

• Khan (2013): “attempts to change the political settlement are highly risky and the results are too uncertain for this to be policy advice that can be given with any confidence”

• PS as complex social systems – promising to link with the research on governance in complex social systems (eg Holling, Ostrom)

• fragility – resilience divide (as used in statebuilding, eg OECD 2011) makes sense, but needs to be reframed (fragility and resilience are particular qualities; per se neither positive nor negative)
Transforming Political Settlements?

- Linear assumptions (e.g., the more inclusive, the better the PS) problematic, thinking in thresholds and equilibriums

- **PS research**: dangers in linking normative assumptions too closely with research agenda

- PS a matter of multi-scale governance – contextual conditions vary, but different scales and types of PS may exist in overlapping ways (no clear-cut spatial or hierarchical distinctions)

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Conceptualising Agency

• **Agency – matter of perception.** Threshold conditions to become part of elite bargaining – being perceived as powerful and knowing the “rules of the game”
• **“Elite” a *contextual* concept**
• **Multi-scale perspective** might alleviate normative reservations; PS (*plural*) enable multiple forms of agency
• **Agency as transformative entry point:** more empirical analysis necessary (what creates threshold conditions?)
Institutional Quality

- Making use of NIE: PS institutions as institutions in a more general sense (not only regulative, but cultural, normative)
- formal vs. informal institutions of PS – norms as institutions?
- “normative space” (Jones et al): Norms keep PS together in times of crisis – enable coping and adaptability while providing transformative angle
- However: what norms are in place, do they fit with the international rights agenda?

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Conclusions

• PS as achievement in “era of disillusionment”: enables linkage to complex social systems thinking
• PS are multi-scale, overlapping, unpredictable formations, but with regularities and commonalities (resilience research!)
• Analysis should focus on comparatively identifying those, measurement however is difficult: linear correlations are highly unlikely
• PS in policy uptake: politics matter!

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