

# **Norms that (get) diffuse:**

## **Exploring the role of myths in local norm adaption**

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### **Abstract**

How do myths influence the local adaption of norms in non-Western contexts? In their seminal essay, Meyer and Rowan (1977) consider isomorphism of institutional structures as a “celebration” of an institutionalized myth of rationality. According to this approach, social actors base their practices on a myth of world culture in order to raise legitimacy for their policies. This implies that norms diffuse in a simple top-down direction of effect which leaves the delivered norm unchanged. This paper takes up Meyer and Rowans’ focus on myth. However, we understand myths as meta-narratives which work along three dimensions – time, space, and ethics– in order to provide a coherent model to order social reality. This enables us to identify local contingencies and struggles for discursive hegemony, which concurs with the diffusion of apparently universal norms to local contexts. Bringing an IR and an area study perspective together allows us to see normative change as a set of complex discursive processes that entail interpretation and re-signification of contending norms. Myths play a key role in these processes as they are the means to naturalize social reality. In the process of norm diffusion, we argue that a norm does not only diffuse, a norm itself also gets diffuse. Two case studies illustrate the argument: the debate about genetically modified food entering Indian markets and the persistence of ritual constructions of moral authority in Thailand. In both cases, the role of myths is crucial for the different strategies social actors pursue to construct political legitimacy. They often do so by trying to naturalize their respective political positions in the political discourse. Our focus on myths opens a discursive field in which a purportedly dominant myth of world culture struggles for discursive hegemony vis-à-vis subaltern myths.

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## 1. Introduction

In scholarly debates on norm research, we witness a lack of dialogue between International Relations (IR) and area studies.<sup>1</sup> While IR scholars are rather structuralist in approach, area studies tend to stress context and local initiative. These differences on the importance of the local and the global in norm research mirror a larger divide on generalisation and contextualisation between the disciplines. Looking at processes of norm diffusion may not only further a better understanding of the interplay between global and local factors in norm research, but also help to create a dialogue between IR and area studies. Taking up the concept of myth, our paper looks at the discursive conditions of normative change from an interdisciplinary and critical perspective. This enables the identification of local contingencies and struggles for discursive hegemony concurring with the diffusion of apparently global norms to local contexts. In order to explore the politics of this dialogue between the global and the local in norm research, several questions are pertinent: How do global and local narratives interact? Who is entitled to speak in the first place? Whose voice matters in this dialogue?

We conceptualize local norm adaptations as complex discursive processes that entail interpretation and re-signification of global norms in local contexts. We argue here that norms do not simply move from one stable state to another as often conceptualized in norm research. They need to be grounded in local narratives to make sense with the symbolic orders of social actors in their specific contexts. In other words, a norm does not only *diffuse*, the norm itself also *gets diffuse*. Myths play a key role in these processes as they help to naturalize specific understandings of social order which are being perpetuated by way of norm diffusion. Thus, our interpretative approach sheds light on the enabling effect of myths in local norm adaptation processes.

Two case studies illustrate the argument: the debate about genetically modified (GM) food entering Indian markets and the persistence of ritual constructions of legitimate authority in Thailand. In both cases, the role of myths is crucial for the different strategies social actors pursue to construct political legitimacy by trying to “naturalize” their respective positions in the political discourse. Our focus opens a discursive field in which purportedly dominant Western myths of

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rationality and modernity struggle for discursive hegemony vis-à-vis alternative local narratives. Studying the dialogue between the local and the global in norm research contributes to a broader interdisciplinary dialogue between IR and area studies.<sup>2</sup> In the following, we firstly give an overview about norm research in International Relations and identify blind spots of mainstream approaches on norm diffusion. Integrating a postcolonial perspective, in the next part we sketch an analytical framework to grasp the role of myths in local norm adaption processes. Section four applies our model to two cases in Asia. The final section summarizes our argument and suggests implications for a closer dialogue between area studies and International Relations.

## **2. Norms that diffuse in IR**

How and under which conditions do global norms influence local normative orders in non-Western countries? In International Relations, the diffusion of norms is mainly conceptualized as an implementation of international norms at the level of the nation state.<sup>3</sup> Our paper looks at the local adaption of global norms within the process of their diffusion, defining norms as “shared (social) understandings of standards of behaviour“ (Klotz 1995, 451). The theoretical starting point of our paper is a critical take on sociological institutionalism (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Meyer, Ramirez, and Soysal 1992; Strang and Meyer 1993; Meyer et al. 1997; Meyer 1999). This neo-institutionalist approach<sup>4</sup> is often invoked in IR to explain processes of institutional change and norm diffusion in particular. According to sociological institutionalism, norms diffuse because they reflect globalized cultural models, which are mainly attributed to the West and are thus considered rational and modern. The reference to universal models of rationality therefore legitimizes social practices in a non-Western context.<sup>5</sup>

Sociological institutionalism presumes the existence of “universalistic (world) models like citizenship, socioeconomic development and rationalized justice” (Meyer et al. 1997, 148). These models contain normative and cognitive scripts and myths which help actors to create legitimate practices and identities. With the world-wide spread of such cultural norms and rules, similar

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<sup>2</sup> There has been a growing body of literature illuminating the IR/area studies intersection, cf. Acharya 2006; Acharya and Buzan 2007; Moore 2004; Teti 2007; Tickner and Tsygankov 2008.

<sup>3</sup> For empirical applications that operate with this or similar conceptualizations of norm diffusion, see i.e. Fuchs 2007; Most and Starr 1990; Simmons and Elkins 2004; Strang 1991; Strang and Meyer 1993.

<sup>4</sup> It is sometimes also called Stanford School, world polity or world culture approach.

<sup>5</sup> Words are problematic. For instance, we are aware of the fact that using terms like “the West” might actually reify these and other entities (such as “the Rest”) as apparently coherent and stable ontological actors (Hall 2009 [1992]). When we use these terms in this paper, we regard them as labels rather than as really existing entities.

institutional structures – so-called structural isomorphism – evolve in world society. Research of the Stanford School mainly focuses on structural isomorphism, not on the differences in implementation of global norms. John W. Meyer et al. assume that structural similarities in institutions “*derive from worldwide models constructed and propagated through global cultural and associational processes*” (ibid., 144–5; emphasis in the original). They elaborate on their argument in a counter-factual thought experiment in which a to-date unknown island society is discovered and systematically integrated into world society (ibid.). Expert knowledge, socialization processes in international institutions and world cultural models would lead to the (imaginary) island society adapting to rational world culture in the course of its first encounter with it. Here, institutions play a decisive role, which are defined as cultural rules that structure social interactions in a way that is generally understandable (ibid.). Sociological institutionalism theorizes the development of a rational world culture as processes of institutionalization. In these processes, certain rules, which are considered as following a functionalist logic, are defined as natural and self-evident while simultaneously erasing alternative meanings. The institutionalization of these cultural models is based on the Western tradition, which is closely intertwined with the universal moral authority of rationality and the lawful order of nature (Thomas et al. 1987). The world culture approach started out as an explicit criticism of individualistic approaches, which explain social behavior by the decisions and characteristics of rational actors. Rather, social interaction in modern society is explained by institutionalized rules whereas the concept of rationality takes over a nearly mythical role. Moreover, rational world culture is considered as being universally valid; it even appears to be ‘just natural’.

Our point of contention with sociological institutionalism (and by extension the bulk of IR literature on norm diffusion for that matter) is its representation of norm adaption as a quasi-natural process in which local “norm-takers” simply accept a global norm. This modernization-theoretical approach towards norm diffusion is problematic due to its top-down perspective and also because it insufficiently considers conflict and power in norm diffusion processes. Critics of this approach to norm research tend to stress the role of local actors instead. While these contending approaches rightly point to the importance of social context and local agency, they still reify the local/global dichotomy. In contrast, we argue that the local/global distinction is a metaphor that undermines a better understanding of the discursive processes at work in norm

diffusion. Instead, our paper proposes to focus on the concept of myth to account for the force behind normative change, thus underlining the importance of discursive interpretations of norms by social actors. These revert to different myths and narratives to make sense of processes of normative change that take place in various local contexts. We argue that approaches which conceptualize these processes from a simple top-down or bottom-up perspective cannot sufficiently explain the occurring conflicts and dynamic interactions between social actors. Therefore, we see the process of norm diffusion as situated in a discursive field of interaction, in which social actors try to link a norm to different myths. We understand myths here as a meta-narrative which works along three dimensions – time, space, and ethics – in order to provide a coherent model to order social reality. They can be traced in the form of stories which are narrated as “of old” and provide a mythological tale about the origins, present and future of a given society. What is more, myths most often also naturalize a specific spatial understanding of social phenomena. They are politically powerful as they also contain models about appropriate moral behavior. Placing a political statement within a mythological narrative works to “naturalize” this statement. Accordingly, myths play a central part as they legitimize a specific meaning in the discourse as true while excluding others at the same time. However, as these processes are always contested, we argue that a norm’s meaning is never fixed but always diffuse.

In the following, we take up Antje Wiener’s proposition to distinguish between behaviorist and reflexive approaches in norm research to locate the position of the Stanford School along these poles (Wiener 2004). Accordingly, behaviorist approaches comprise studies “with a predominant focus on state behavior as a reaction to international norms”, while reflexive approaches cover “those which stress the role of discursive interventions as social practices that entail and re/construct the meaning of norms” (ibid., 190). These approaches assume different mechanisms and consequences to be involved in the process of norm diffusion: while behaviorists study a norm’s influence on actor behavior, reflexive approaches deal with the constituting impact of social practices. Wiener points to the most important difference between the two: behaviorists regard norms as stable, while reflexive approaches see norms as flexible and contested (ibid., 191).

The Stanford School can be situated in between these poles. Despite their structure-oriented approach, Meyer et al. follow a behaviorist path, since they assume that universal,

stable norms diffuse in a kind of top-down approach. Other structure-oriented approaches in norm research, such as Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink's (1998) examine the mechanisms of norm diffusion more closely. Norms diffuse in a socialization process and develop into a collective understanding of appropriate behavior through a phase model ("life cycle"). The three-phase process creates the diffusion of a norm from its creation (1) over its wide-spread acceptance (2) (labeled by Sunstein 1997 as "norm cascade") to its internalization (3) (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). Analog to Meyer et al., here, international norms form the centre of the analysis. Jeffrey Legro criticizes the analytical focus which many norm researchers place on the diffusion of international norms as exhibited in behavioralist approaches:

"[...] recent analyses have overemphasized international prescriptions while neglecting norms that are rooted in other types of social entities - e.g., regional, national, and subnational groups. This oversight has led scholars to ignore significant subsystemic social understandings that can contradict and overwhelm international prescriptions." (Legro 1997, 32)

Meyer's approach as well as Finnemore and Sikkink's conceptualize the diffusion of international norms and analyze these processes from a top-down perspective; yet, we can discern different assumptions on the interaction between global and local norms. Especially Meyer et al. are often criticized for not specifically questioning the local adaption of world cultural models (Dierkes and Koenig 2006). Meyer et al. assume that due to the all-encompassing legitimacy of these global models, "local models find it difficult to compete with these legitimations" (Meyer et al. 1997, 149). Also conflict and power are rarely discussed in sociological institutionalism (Anderson-Levitt 2003). The social conditions of normative change which account for the actual transfer of world-cultural models in local contexts have not been at the centre of this research program (cf. however the volume edited by Ramirez 1988). Meyer et al. argue that local differences in organizational structures result from varying degrees in institutionalization of world cultural models; yet, they do not elaborate sufficiently on these assumptions (Finnemore 1996; Thomas et al. 1987). Finnemore and Sikkink on the other hand see a close connection between international and national norms. This is true for the evolution from national to international norms as well as the implementation of international norms contingent on national structures.

This can lead to important variations in compliance with and meaning of norms (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 893). Nevertheless, the norm itself remains stable here.

Turning to reflexive approaches, the literature on norm diffusion refers to the adaptability of global norms in local contexts.<sup>6</sup> According to Jeffrey Checkel, the diffusion of norms is “[...] more rapid when [...] a systemic norm [...] resonates with historically constructed domestic norms“ (Checkel 1999, 87). This requires a ”cultural match“ between global and local norms, which is defined as “a situation where the prescriptions embodied in an international norm are convergent with domestic norms” (ibid.). Thus, country-specific characteristics matter. Yet, similar to the world culture model, there is a lack of explicit statements on how global and local norms interact. In order to explain the diffusion and legitimacy of a norm beyond describing its degree of institutionalization, it is essential to make substantial assumptions on how the adaption of global norms by local actors works. In this respect, Finnemore and Sikkink point to the relevance of framing as a strategy for norm development. This includes a (re-)interpretation process, where norm entrepreneurs use language to create cognitive frames, which are deployed strategically to implement norms (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 897). This framing constructs an alternative interpretation of an already existing norm, eventually putting the agreements about the appropriateness of this norm into question. When norm entrepreneurs’ political strategies are successful, “the new frames resonate with broader public understandings and are adopted as new ways of talking about and understanding issues. In constructing their frames, norm entrepreneurs face firmly embedded alternative norms and frames that create alternative perceptions of both appropriateness and interest” (ibid.).<sup>7</sup>

Thomas Risse and Kathryn Sikkink attend the unanswered question of a norm’s consensual connection to local values within its discursive legitimization. They emphasize the role of discursive practices of communication, argumentation and persuasion next to its instrumental adaptation and institutionalization, which occur in the diffusion of norms – understood as a process of socialization (Risse and Sikkink 2008). By including processes of persuasion, Risse and Sikkink go beyond the blind spots of the models of norm diffusion presented by Meyer et al. and Finnemore/Sikkink. However, as Charlotte Epstein (2010, 7–9) noted recently, constructivist literature on norm diffusion which treats socialization as key mechanism of norm diffusion still

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<sup>6</sup> See also Klotz 1995, 1999, 2002 for more constructivist work on norms in international politics.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. also Deitelhoff 2006, 2009.

assumes the given-ness of norms which seem to diffuse from one stable state to another. In order to grasp the negotiation process between global and local norms as a discursive process of (re-)constitution, one needs to take discourses as “structure of meaning-in-use“ (Milliken 1999, 231) into account.

In contrast to reflexive approaches which examine the local legitimatization of a global norm and its process of diffusion, Amitav Acharya proposes “localization” as a framework to explain local norm (re-)constitution. Localization is defined as

“[...] the active construction (through discourse, framing, grafting, and cultural selection) of foreign ideas by local actors, which results in the former developing significant congruence with local beliefs and practices.“ (Acharya 2004, 245)

This concept describes a process, by which an external norm is somehow brought into line with an existing local normative order. In this model, norm recipients create compliance between transnational norms<sup>8</sup> and local ideas and practices in a “dynamic congruence-building process” (ibid.). Acharya therefore explains the acceptance of a global norm by its adaption to local conditions and views external and existing norms in a co-conditional relationship. The local adaption of a global norm is only part of a larger process of localization in his frame of analysis: “[...] while adaption may be tactical and to some extent forced on the target audience, localization is voluntary and the resulting change likely to be more enduring“ (ibid., 251). Even though Acharya underlines the interdependency in the constitution of norms, he only examines the local implementation of institutionalized norms and does not deal with the actual processes of interaction and deliberation of global and local norms. Acharya’s intervention is of high relevance as it points to local agency as an important factor in norm adaption processes. However, he maintains the local/global dichotomy and does not conceptualize norm diffusion as a process in which the diffused norm might be transformed.

Topics like hybridization and the interdependency between the local and the global are important issues in postcolonial studies. Postcolonial authors such as Dipesh Chakrabarty (1992; 2002), Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1984) or Shalini Randeria (2007) criticize Western

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<sup>8</sup> Acharya (2004) uses the concept of “transnational norm“ synonymously with our notion of global norms.

perspectives on global processes, such as the ones above, as being Eurocentric: theoretical approaches, which portray specific European paths of development, are proclaimed as universally valid. Postcolonial authors in the field of *Subaltern Studies* thus focus on the exertion of power and rule in non-Western societies (Chakrabarty 2002). This alternative view, for instance on the colonial history of India, reveals two different logics at work in the colonial system of domination: on the one hand, there is the legal and institutional order created by the British, on the other, Chakrabarty identifies a less evident system, which he refers to as “semiotics of domination and subordination“ and which is interwoven with the institutional order.

“The semiotics of domination and subordination were what the subaltern classes sought to destroy every time they rose up in rebellion. The semiotics could not be separated in the Indian case from what in English we inaccurately refer to as *the religious* or *the supernatural*.” (ibid., 10)

The central role of religious ideas and norms refers to the controversial question on the separation of politics and religion, which is the very basis of an apparently universally valid comprehension of rationality. While Western observers often describe the characteristics of this second hierarchical logic as pre-political, postcolonial authors search for the consequences of these different views for scientific statements and models of explanation (Chakrabarty 1992). Local norms and structures cannot simply be conceptualized as the expression of an incomplete transition towards modern, capitalist or democratic institutions and norms. While Meyer et al. explain deviations from world cultural models with an insufficient implementation of the project of modernization, postcolonial approaches focus on this hybrid space of deliberation between locally and globally accepted norms (Chakrabarty 2002, 28). Chakrabarty asks for more consideration for tales of power and modernity and criticizes the use of categories such as pre-modern, pre-political, pre-capitalist as expressions of “stagist views of history“ (ibid., 14).<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, our excursion into postcolonial studies shows that models of norm diffusion cannot grasp the diffused nature of norms. Such processes of (re-)interpretation can, however, lead to a hybridization of norms, which Ling describes as a process of interstitial transformation:

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<sup>9</sup> The expression “stagist views of history“ relates to the idea that non-Western histories are plays acted out according to Western scripts. Meyer’s causal role of cognitive scripts for a universal world culture here overlaps with postcolonial criticism on “staging of history“.

“Interstitial transformation arises when two governing regimes or world-orders overlap. These interstices may be mutually contradictory (for example, Confucian governance vs. Westphalian capitalism) or mutually reinforcing (for example, Confucian patriarchy and capitalist hypermasculinity). In either case, problem-solvers draw on ‘old’ discourses to make ‘new’ sense of such anomalies.” (Ling 2002, 22)

Taking up these critical interventions, we propose a re-conceptualization of Meyer’s myth concept which might help to grasp the diffuse nature of norms.

### **3. Norms that get diffuse**

In sociological institutionalist approaches to norm diffusion, the grip of world cultural models derives from a purely functionalist myth of rationality which is deemed legitimate. We argue that by exploring the role of myths in processes of norm diffusion one might account for studying norms as “meaning-in-use”. However, we need a conceptualization of myth that goes beyond purely functionalist notions in order to account for the role of myths in processes of normative change. In this section, we propose a conceptual framework in which we consider a myth as a meta-narrative which naturalizes a specific model of social reality. Invoking a myth allows for the creation of a consensus and thus enables social interaction. Its authority is justified in the sense that – to paraphrase Clifford Geertz – the myth presents a model *of* as well as *for* social reality (Lincoln 1989, 24). A myth can be separated analytically in three dimensions: time, space and ethics.<sup>10</sup> These dimensions work together and are closely interrelated. They provide a model for ordering the world into a coherent whole. Isabelle Grunberg examined the inner logic of myths as “a way of ordering the apparent chaos while respecting the diversity, ambivalence, and overdetermination of myths. It focuses on the structure, rather than the specific content, of mythical material and seeks to draw its hidden, underlying logic, which is primarily narrative” (Grunberg 1990, 450). Different myths can be distinguished according to the way in which they provide a model for ordering social reality.

Many studies do not conceptualize myth properly but focus on the function of myths in the fields of identity or discourse formation. This absence of a coherent conceptualization creates

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<sup>10</sup> Lene Hansen uses these three dimensions for her poststructuralist analysis of the relationship between identity and foreign policy, see Hansen 2006; Hansen refers to Walker 1993.

a lot of insecurity about what constitutes a myth in the first place and how to trace it analytically. Many scholars who engage the concept refer to the work of Roland Barthes (2006). Barthes underlines that by evocating a myth, certain ideas can be excluded from the political discussion. In effect, this might render the articulation of alternative meanings impossible. By naturalizing a statement into a kind of truism, a de-politicization of a political discourse takes place (Edkins 1999; Zehfuss 2002). Myths play an important role in this respect. While a myth records a story about the imagined origin of a given society, its naturalizing function can work as well in any context. Myths define which meanings are considered as true in the discourse; they legitimize the adaption of certain norms in the process of diffusion. This carries no weight on the actual truth or untruth of a myth, but only on its usage by social actors (Barthes 2006, 133). If we accept Barthes's understanding of the myth as a de-politicized statement (*ibid.*), its discursive function therefore is to move away specific meanings from political deliberation by presenting them as quasi-natural.

Lene Hansen and Michael Williams (1999) exemplify this working of myths in their essay on European integration and show how a successful myth cannot be recognized as such. Functionalist approaches attribute a lack of European myth to the debate on the supposed legitimacy deficit in Europe. In this narrative, European integration is framed as following purely technocratic, rational considerations. However, Hansen and Williams illustrate that this is in fact a case of a perfect working of the myth of rationality: these seemingly rational considerations in the logic of functionalism in fact obey the myth of Western modernity (*ibid.*). Instead of a myth-free space, one is confronted with a powerful myth, which – due to its taken-for-grantedness – is considered as natural.<sup>11</sup>

As their function can be described as transforming history into nature, myths can be used as a resource in political discourse. Ronald Brunner defines the political myth as “comprised of the most basic assumptions that justify and explain the possession and use of power – whether or not the assumptions are true” (Brunner 1994, 3). This has important implications for norm research. Norms are interpreted by social actors who link them to long-standing myths. For example, in US politics, references to myths are essential to mobilize political support in US

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<sup>11</sup> Also compare Feige's sceptical question on the myth's compatibility with today's modern, secular, disenchanted world (Feige 1999, 161).

politics (ibid.). Political actors who invoke these myths often refer to key texts, which embody the founding myth of the nation, e.g. the *Declaration of Independence*.<sup>12</sup>

The function of a myth is to bring about an authoritative closing of a discourse.<sup>13</sup> The extent to which this closing takes place determines its power. Closure and the ensuing depoliticization are, however, never easily accepted (Edkins 1999; Zehfuss 2002). According to Duncan Bell there are always alternative readings and contested meanings and even subaltern myths, which question a myth's hegemony:

“[...] [T]here will always be dissent and the story will never be accepted consistently and universally. [...] The governing myth thus coexists with and is constantly contested by subaltern myths, which are capable of generating their own traditions and stories [...]” (Bell 2003, 74)

Hereby, Bell is not concerned with a supposed origin of a myth but with the way in which a narrative is told (ibid., 68–9). This mythological narration is located in a discursive field of interaction, in which memories and myths are deliberated and where multiple and often conflicting narratives are (re)written. Linguistic and ritual forms of narration and representation of myths thus come into view. The discursive field of interaction is the “perpetually mutating repository for the representation of the past for the purposes of the present” (ibid., 66). We would add that the time dimension does not only encompass the past and the present but also narratives about the imagined future.

Meyer's argument about the power of rational world culture would be supported by a theoretical perspective on norm diffusion which deploys a functionalist concept of myth. Following Bell, we recognize the interplay of dominant and subaltern myths. We argue that focusing on a dominant myth only and at the same time conceptualizing myth in a purely functional way pre-structures empirical results on norm diffusion. We contend that our conceptualization along the dimensions of time, space and ethics reveals how norm diffusion approaches are themselves predicated on world cultural myths. A world polity approach to norm research proceeds from the assumption that world culture is the myth which drives diffusion.

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<sup>12</sup> For a Derridaean deconstruction of the US Declaration of Independence, see Honig 1991.

<sup>13</sup> Of course, this is an impossible endeavor, as a discourse can never be closed. Yet, if a powerful myth is at work in discourse, it has a hegemonic effect on what can be said or thought legitimately.

Functionalist conceptualizations of myth preclude the contestedness of norms which results from the working of different myths which are simultaneously at work in processes of norm diffusion. The exclusive focus on functionalist understandings precludes a problematization of norms which would render them much more *diffuse* than mainstream perspectives in norm research can picture. We argue that it is the discursive interplay of contending myths which accounts for the diffuse character of norms. In the remainder of this section, we exemplify this argument by explicating how a myth provides order in norm diffusion approaches along the dimensions of time, space and ethics.

Meyer et al. (1997) conceptualize the creation of social entities as embedded in a continuous process of rationalization. The “origins” of this myth are situated in the historical development of European modernity. According to Meyer and his colleagues, this European myth about the rationality of modern institutions accounts for the appeal of these world cultural models which ultimately explain why norms diffuse globally. The formation of world culture is situated in an imagined and originally European past. The dualism seen between apparently traditional structures and modern institutions leads Meyer and Rowan to conclude that the myth of rationality is only upheld formally or “celebrated” in non-Western countries as they want to be taken seriously at the international level (Meyer and Rowan 1977). A norm’s global diffusion links the temporal with the spatial dimension. Firstly, the temporal framing of norm diffusion as a linear and progressive development enables to situate norms in a temporally ordered system which evolves from tradition to modernity. Secondly, the spatial framing provides a metaphorical distinction between the global and the local as resembled in the narratives of the West and the Rest. According to Stuart Hall, the West represents the “model, the prototype and the measure of social progress” (Hall 2009, 277). Here, the close interaction between the spatial and the temporal dimension of myth becomes clear. Thirdly, Meyer’s myth of world culture is predicated on the moral model of the rational individual. This model defines the frame for appropriate and legitimate behavior of social actors in the first place.

Together, these three dimensions – time as progress, space as global/local distinction, and an ethics that centers on the rational individual – make up the myth of world culture which provides a coherent model to order social reality. This myth offers norm research a logic which enables to explain norm diffusion as a rational process from global to local. A norm may be given

or taken, but in itself it remains unchanged. In this logic, deviations from this model can be explained by an incomplete enactment of world culture in local settings. In such cases, modernizing projects might fail, but this would not entail a destabilization of the myth of world culture.

Summing up, our conceptualization of myth follows Bell in that we argue that contending myths co-exist besides the world cultural myth. These may be responsible for so-called deviations from the world culture model of norm diffusion pointing to different ways of ordering social reality. In effect, these subaltern myths play an important role in what some norm researchers term the local adaption of norms. However, instead of further reifying the logic of diffusion by focusing on the actor-side, we propose to acknowledge the diffuseness of a norm that results from the parallel existence of contending myths.

#### **4. Contending myths in action**

In this section, we will reconstruct the complex interplay of contending myths through an analysis of discursive practices in two cases of normative change. The introduction of ‘Golden Rice’ in India poses a case where the normative understanding is still contested. The local adaption of the norm of domestic sovereignty (Krasner 1999) in Thailand is a case of an institutionalized norm which is deeply embedded in cosmological beliefs about legitimate authority. Our main focus is on the way in which social actors draw on contending myths in order to provide a coherent model of social reality. We reconstruct the myths along the dimensions of time, space and ethics, looking at discursive negotiations and social practices in the formulation of specific norms in different contexts. Thereby, we conceptualize diffusing norms not as static and given but as dynamic and diffuse. In being adapted locally, norms do not only diffuse, but they also get diffuse.

##### **4.1. Contested narratives on ‘Golden Rice’ in India**

Genetically modified foods pose a particularly controversial subject in public discussions. This displays that GM-food cannot only be considered a technology, but incorporates ideas and beliefs about its appropriate handling, i.e. its normative dimension. However, meaning, handling and normative dimension of this technology are contested. The protracted introduction and heated discussions about the costs and benefits of ‘Golden Rice’ give an example of the difficult assessment of biotechnology in the agricultural sector in India. It was invented in 1999 to combat malnutrition and

especially vitamin A-deficiency (VAD) and got its name from the yellow color the added provitamin entailed. Proponents argue that the product will enhance health and life expectancy of consumers especially in developing countries, while critics challenge its health benefits and the social and economic effects of 'Golden Rice'. More than a decade after its initial invention, the bio-engineered rice still is not freely available, but India, as an essentially rice-based society with a large agricultural sector, debates its introduction. As part of a generally controversial and normatively shaped debate on the application of agricultural biotechnology,<sup>14</sup> 'Golden Rice' poses a case where diffusion and adaption processes have not ended in formal institutionalization and regulation, but are in continuous contestation. Importantly, the discussion on 'Golden Rice' in India does not take place in a formerly norm-free space; instead, the discourse is influenced by a specific Indian historic context of British colonialism and the Green Revolution of the 1970s. These experiences have led to widespread distrust among the Indian public towards foreign companies and the application of GMOs in general. Therefore, the introduction of a new kind of GM-food had to compete from the start with an already existing story of agricultural biotechnology. Proponents and critics try to tell a coherent and legitimizing narrative and the discourse on 'Golden Rice' can best be understood according to the mythical dimensions of time, space and ethics. The following paragraphs will illustrate how actors' use of different narratives intermingles in the discourse on this contested norm and follow logics grounded on different myths.

In order to tell a consistent story, discourse participants appeal to the time dimension in trying to link 'Golden Rice' with the present and the past and thereby creating a genealogy. Indian agricultural practices have a long history, which are referred to as an Indian "history of knowledge older than five centuries, [...] farming is called farming of five centuries" (Indian Farmer Ram 2001) and which prominent discourse participants also highlight by pointing out that "women farmers have been the seed keepers and seed breeders for millennia" (Shiva 2001, 14). The reference to Indian agricultural practices stresses a circular understanding of agriculture, as has been historically practiced. Accordingly, 'Golden Rice' poses an intervention to the continuous practice of traditional agriculture; however, on the proponent side scientists do not understand GM-foods as a novelty in agricultural practices. Instead, they indicate that the genetic improvement of crops is a continuum almost since the origin of agriculture starting in 2,000 BC (Miller 2008). The 'Golden Rice' project web page informs the public that "orange-coloured carrots are the product of mutation selected by a Dutch

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<sup>14</sup> Fennell calls the debate over GM crops "a black box that is still open" (Fennell 2009, 9).

horticulturist a few hundred years ago“ (Golden Rice Humanitarian Board 2009). Even Indian scientists try to domesticate biotechnology by proving it to be an old tradition. They link it to older technological achievements that may even create a genealogy for Indian scientists in terms of placing it into a natural evolutionary process and into the familiar: “The molecular method adopted now, which involves addition of one, two or more genes is a drop in the ocean compared to the enormous genetic flux going on in nature” (Visvanathan and Parmar 2002).

When looking at the dimension of space reflected in the discourse on ‘Golden Rice’, a divide between the global and the local, or more specifically between the West and developing countries, becomes apparent. The specific Indian experience of British imperialism influences narratives that relate to the postcolonial condition and reinforces a spatial divide between the global and local (Randeria 2007). The postcolonial fear of dependency from the West is specifically defined against the history of colonization. Ideals such as *swaraj* (self-rule) and *swadeshi* (of one’s own country) recast imperialism and oppression and construct agricultural biotechnology as a threat to Indian identity and the national interest. In an open letter a group of Indian farm leaders formulate their concerns that the Indian prime minister “always follows what the US government tells him”, while they are “keeping the national interest in mind” (Singh 2008), which refers to historic consistencies and dependencies between the West and the Indian state. The spatial division is further reified in emphasizing the local conditions of agriculture. In the discussion on ‘Golden Rice’ an Indian farmer states that it is “[...] an insult to my people if you decide how to overcome my problem with your solution and impose it on my country [...] we are recovering for five decades from a colonial rule that destroyed our farming activity in a systematic manner. We want to solve our problem ourselves” (Indian Farmer Ram 2001). At the same time, proponents of the ‘Golden Rice’ project further reify the spatial divide. But instead of referring to dependency, they outline a responsibility of the West. This manifests itself in naming the ‘Golden Rice’ project a “humanitarian” project, which is also connected to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Golden Rice Humanitarian Board 2009). Some call a non-introduction a “crime against humanity” (Potrykus 2008, 16), or even a “nutritional holocaust” (Golden Rice Humanitarian Board 2009), others argue that there is a “moral imperative” to make GM crops available to developing countries (Nuffield Council on Bioethics 1999, 58).

The dimension of ethics plays an important role in the discourse on ‘Golden Rice’. The prevalent narrative focuses on science’s irrevocable claim for truth and highlights the role of the

rational individual. Various actors use scientific assumptions to legitimize their position: “MNCs, Indian corporates, industry lobbyists, governments, international agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and farmers movements all claim [...] ’science’ to be on their side“ (Seshia and Scoones 2003, 2). Thus, critics also refer to science when calling ‘Golden Rice’ a “technological fix” given other conventional solutions to VAD exist but are ignored (Greenpeace 2001; Shiva 2000b). Due to a specific scientific tradition the concept of science is especially prestigious in India, hence, as “the ultimate key to all problems facing the country, [...] scientists can lay claims to the charisma which in some other political cultures belongs exclusively to god-kings” (Nandy 1990, 8). Science claims to deliver facts and knowledge that are hard to scrutinize and to understand, furthermore, they deepen the divide between science and laymen with the charge of technophobia: “The biggest threats that hungry populations currently face are restrictive policies stemming from unwarranted public fears. [...] Those fears are simply not supported by the scores of peer reviewed scientific reports or the data from tens of thousands of individual field trials” (Prakash and Conko 2004), and “[...] resistance to using modern biotechnology is immense, something that indirectly kills millions and millions of people in the poor world” (The Bertebos Foundation 2008, 8). However, in order to challenge the credibility of the ‘Golden Rice’ project, critical global science associations base their critic on the same scientific authority as the proponents, when they call ‘Golden Rice’ “an exercise in how not to do science” (Ho and Cummins 2009) and accuse the project of breaching the Nuremberg/medical ethics code (Hooper 2009).

This narrative of the rationality of science stands in contrast to another mythological dimension of ethics, which is reflected in references to Christian beliefs and practices. The ‘Golden Rice’ project is explicitly linked to religious symbols such as the founder of the project, Ingo Potrykus, meeting with the Pope and handing him symbolically a print of a research proposal. Hence, a pro-‘Golden Rice’ conference report frequently uses bible references (“I was hungry and you did not feed me” The Bertebos Foundation 2008) but also philosophical sayings (“He who has bread may have troubles. He who lacks it has only one problem”; “Let food be your medicine” *ibid.*, 104, 35). By declaring new technologies a “salvation for the poor” (*ibid.*, 8) ‘Golden Rice’ is circumscribed as a panacea to mankind’s problems and a way to achieve redemption. Critics call these philanthropic narratives an explicit PR strategy of private and public actors who have to grapple with a historically-based bad reputation in the agribiotech sector in India. They argue that this sector conceived creative ways to counterbalance its negative perception with moral power and solidarity (Shiva 2001). While

the Golden Rice Humanitarian Board uses Christian symbols to legitimize their stance, some biotech companies use Indian local religious symbols to sell their products: “Even gods, goddesses, and saints were not spared: in Punjab, Monsanto sells its products using the image of Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh religion” (Shiva 2000a, 10). Allusions to religious symbols by proponents of the project are a common theme in the discussion of ‘Golden Rice’. However, critics often refer to traditional or indigenous knowledge and practices in the specific Indian context and point to a shared understandings of the natural order instead. More specifically, a close relationship to nature and seeds as a symbol of reproductive cyclicity manifests itself in agricultural and ecological practices in different local Indian contexts (Gold 2003; Gupta 1998; Shiva 2000a). These narratives of ethics do not refer to a logic of the rational individual but touch upon activities based on a cosmological understanding of the world and the achievement of ‘karma’.

The discourse on the introduction of ‘Golden Rice’ and hence the normalization of agricultural biotechnology in India reveals the acting of a world cultural myth that works to create a legitimate understanding of this norm. Accordingly, agricultural biotechnology is represented as being part of a linear progress of development and towards a form of modernity where the West presents the model for progress. It is based on the idea of rationally acting individuals and pictures ‘Golden Rice’ as the ultimate disenchantment (*Entzauberung*) of the world. Next to the iterative use of narratives which mirror the working of a world cultural myth, deviant narratives unfold that this myth is contested. Narratives following the logic of a world cultural myth intermingle with narratives that emphasize nature’s circularity and local agricultural practices, as well as philanthropy or karma. While arguing with science and reason, for instance, many actors connect this narrative with philanthropy or cosmological understandings of the world – linking the disenchanting with the (re-)enchanted world. At the same time a global and local divide is held up, but different perspectives are emphasized in narratives of world cultural learning processes and postcolonial dependencies. The existence of different narratives points to different myths at work. What is more, the amalgamation of different narratives reveal that an evolving understanding of the normative dimension of ‘Golden Rice’ is not only contested but also the result of different logics. It constructs a meaning of a norm which is grounded on different myths, where an understanding of the normative dimensions of agricultural biotechnology gets increasingly diffuse.

#### 4.2. Exploring the power of myths: The case of Thailand

At a first glance, Thailand seems to be a particularly well-suited case to demonstrate the working of world culture. The former Kingdom of Siam was one of the few states which retained formal independence from Western powers. Moreover, Siam/Thailand apparently demonstrates self-induced social learning or emulation as a strategy to embrace world culture (Englehart 2010; Lynch 2004). In this modernist reading of Thai history, military and bureaucratic elites are key modernizing agents of change which started a nation-building project in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century to transform the multicultural Kingdom of Siam into modern Thailand. The conceptual model to become a sovereign state was the nation (Anderson 2003; Wyatt 2003). However, without a tradition or history as a nation-state in the Westphalian sense, a coherent story about the Thai nation had to be constructed:

“The central justification for modern Thai nationalism was the reference to one religion (Buddhism), one language (Thai) and one monarchy as the nation’s highest political and moral authority. This was coupled with the propagation of the Thai language, the encouragement of the Buddhist orders, and the symbolic merging of state and Buddhism in the institution of monarchy.” (Croissant and Trinn 2009, 30).

The time dimension in the working of the world cultural myth becomes clear: to be a nation state requires being able to draw on a national history. This history has to follow quasi-naturally from an imagined past which is presented in the form of a historical narrative. In order to construct this coherent and apparently progressive narrative, Thai modernizers drew on the historical legacy of the Buddhist monarchy as unifying force to define what it could mean to be a Thai state (Winichakul 1995). *Theravada* Buddhism, the monarchy and ‘Thai culture’ were regarded as suitable prerequisites to construct a modern Thai nationalism which – following world cultural models – could be acknowledged as legitimate practices. The spatial dimension constructs Thailand as a territorially bounded nation state in which the inside can be clearly demarcated from an imagined outside. Here, world cultural models provide a rational way of ordering world politics in spatial terms (Winichakul 1994). The moral dimensions draws on the norm of state sovereignty as the normative foundation of the international system. This norm rests on the Westphalian myth of the separation of religious and political authority within the

sovereign state, and is now considered as the universal *Grundnorm* of international politics (Walker 1993).

However, to explain the specific way in which this re-signification of world cultural models took place in Thailand one needs to take into account discursive practices in everyday Thai politics. Processes of re-signification are always contested. In moments of disruption, political practices challenge the regime in place by aiming to re-signify the moral grammar of Thai sovereignty and to negotiate anew how the state should be imagined. The current political events in Thailand might provide some clues about the interplay of discursive practices and the force of myths in Thai politics.<sup>15</sup>

The origins of the ongoing political crisis in Thailand can be traced back to the Asian Financial Crisis that hit the country hard in 1997. As a result of the social upheavals in the wake of the economic crisis, increased poverty and political dissatisfaction with the government contributed to the rise of Thaksin Shinawatra to power. In alliance with social movements and civil society organizations, Thaksin's *Thai Rak Thai* (TRT) Party became the main opposition force against the government and its IMF economic policies that were adopted after 1997. Drawing on nationalist and communitarian discourses, Thaksin and his party promised to support the poor and "save the country" from foreign control (Kitirianglarp and Hewison 2009, 454). This rather unlikely alliance of grassroots NGOs with Thailand's top tycoon and billionaire businessman seemed to promote an alternative approach to development than the government's Western development discourse that promised to ameliorate the lot of the poor. When the TRT party eventually came into power in January 2001, it had established links with many NGOs, social movements and business organizations, which facilitated the connection between a rather capitalist opposition party and the rural and urban poor. Its credible commitment as an alternative to neoliberal economic policies enabled the TRT party to present itself as "the 'true friend' of the poor and a promoter of nationalist-communitarian interests" (ibid., 456).

At this time the opposition did not openly challenge the political system and its power mechanisms as such. Rather, protesters demanded case-by-case concessions, but not fundamental transformations of the power relations. Once in power, the Thaksin government introduced policies to ameliorate the situation of the poor; yet, without addressing the fundamental social

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<sup>15</sup> A caveat is in order here: given the restricted space of this paper, we can of course not submit a coherent genealogy of the Thai state.

inequalities which characterize Thai society. Instead of seriously targeting the structural problem of rural development, the government sought to alleviate individual and single-issue topics. As the TRT government started to resume privatization policies, it lost the support of social movements and progressive intellectuals (*ibid.*, 461).

During the 2005 election campaign, Thaksin's former allies started to lobby against the TRT government, denouncing its alleged corruption, cronyism and money politics. In this respect, these actors draw on nationalist and 'clean politics' discourses which were linked with the king's ideas about the 'sufficiency economy'. "This link was meant to contrast TRT's alleged abuse of power with the king's superior moral power" (*ibid.*, 466). Moreover, social movements which had supported the Thaksin party after the Asian Crisis now allied with conservative parties and royalist forces against the government. Increasingly, Thaksin was accused of being a threat to the monarchy and its interests. While these charges did not pay off in the 2005 elections, they were adopted by activists in the following anti-Thaksin demonstrations which resulted in repeated calls for the king as head of state to dissolve the government and appoint a new administration (Connors 2008). The newly set up People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), an anti-Thaksin coalition of conservative and royalist elites and representatives of social movements, now claimed to defend the nation and the king, proclaiming slogans like 'We fight for the King' to 'save the nation'. Nationalist and royalist narratives united the conservative elite in Bangkok with representatives of social movements.

In September 2006, a palace-supported military coup finally ousted the Thaksin government and installed a military junta as interim government in Thailand (Hewison 2008; Kitirianglarp and Hewison 2009). Since then, an on-going political, economic and ideological conflict revolves around the competing claims of two political groups: the anti-Thaksin coalition of the People's Alliance for Democracy associated with social movements, the royalists and the military on the one hand and the pro-Thaksin opposition forces also known as the 'Red Shirts' on the other. The latter camp is primarily backed by the urban and rural poor. The back and forth between these competing groups and the violent clashes revolve around the political logic of claiming the moral authority gained through the monarchy for each respective side. So what is at stake in this moment of political upheaval?

We argue that the moral dimension of the myth of royal authority plays an important part in explaining what is going on in the current crisis. Until 1997, the ruling regime was governed by a powerful elite alliance comprised of parts of the administration, the military and leading royalists (Connors 1997). Social practices stabilized the existing power structure; even if there were continuously power shifts taking place, overall, the regime was relatively stable. This regime builds on mythological narratives that are predicated on Buddhist notions of moral authority. By constantly invoking the overarching political role of Buddhist kingship, or *Dhammaraja*, social actors in Thailand ritually re-enact mythological narratives of its imagined past as a former Buddhist kingdom. In effect, references to *Theravada* Buddhism and the monarchy as the ultimate holder and the source of Thai sovereignty work as social practices that are of paramount importance for all aspects of social and political life (Connors 2008). The institution of Buddhist kingship and the related moral precepts for appropriate political behavior are an important imaginative resource for social actors to construct political legitimacy. However, these moral and imaginative models exceed a world cultural myth of progressive development in a disenchanted world. They provide the idealized concepts about how social order should be imagined and organized *as a cosmological totality*. Connors summarizes the basic assumption of this conceptualization as follows: “you [the King, KG & SE] perform the legitimacy function of symbolic unity and assume power of last resort. In return you are eulogized and made sacral, your earthly endeavours will be ignored” (ibid., 149).

This discourse is ritually stabilized by all kinds of every day practices. For instance, images of the King and the royal family are ritually displayed in public and private buildings, in electoral campaigns of all political parties, in public broadcasting, and so forth. Critique against the monarchy is ruled out by charges of *lèse majesté* (Handley 2006; Hewison 2008). These social practices led to the sedimentation of a regime that builds on a specific logic of moral authority to which social actors relate in their everyday behavior. This logic of a pure authority is closely tied to Buddhist models of morality and the monarchy as ultimate source of sovereignty – in opposition to models of popular sovereignty that are fundamental in Western notions of liberal democracy.

Yet, one might argue that the King has no real power in the political system. As head of state, he exercises merely ceremonial duties. The power of the myth behind the narratives

embodied by the King becomes clearer in the ensuing analysis of the current crisis as an instance of political disruption. The economic turmoil in the wake of the economic crisis provided a window of opportunity for Thaksin and his party who were able to challenge this logic of power. In this situation, political practices were articulated that aimed at re-inscribing the content of the regime of sovereignty in Thailand. Thaksin's rise to power was closely connected to the nationalist and communitarian discourses he employed after the Asian Crisis. Criticizing the way the old regime dealt with the social economic upheavals, Thaksin quickly gained a large following within the hitherto marginalized groups of society (Connors 2009). However, this attempt to re-signify the imaginative logic of power meant that at the same time Thaksin jeopardized the most important symbol of the nation – the King who literally embodies Thai sovereignty. In the context of Thai politics, this was a serious threat for the regime in power and it soon became a threat to Thaksin's own claims to political authority. And as demonstrated about, this narrative resource was in fact strategically employed in a royalist campaign against the TRT party. Some of Thaksin's former allies joined in this campaign after the TRT government failed to abide to its own political goals. Thaksin himself seemed to be well aware of the political force of the allegation of being against the monarchy; yet he was unable to institute a viable discursive alternative.

The functioning of myths in this case comes close to Glynos and Howarth's concept of fantasmatic logics: a myth provides a coherent model to fill the void of identity with objects which are suitable for identification (Glynos and Howarth 2007). Of course, there is no essentially Thai identity which can be somehow defined with a mix of Buddhism, a certain interpretation of Thai culture and a mythological conception of kingship. The function of myths is to provide an imagination with which people can identify and which makes reality consistent (to paraphrase Žižek). This myth provides a specific legitimating idea or narrative with force.<sup>16</sup> The TRT government seemed to have actively sought to replace this void with other discursive projects than the reference to monarchy. One such strategy can be observed during the first years of Thaksin's government when the religious-linguistic conflict with the Muslims in Thailand's Southern provinces around Pattani escalated (Croissant and Trinn 2009). As Pattani's Muslims are not included in Thai culture, religion or political community, they seemed to provide a

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<sup>16</sup> In this respect, Tambiah's seminal study on the relationship between Buddhism and politics in Thailand provides a fascinating account of the cosmological foundations of the Thai "galactic polity" (Tambiah 1977).

suitable 'Other' to construct a common enemy for the government.<sup>17</sup> However, diverting the question of identity towards a non-Self did not really solve the problem.

In retrospect, it seems that Thaksin and his party had the opportunity to seriously challenge the royalist discourse when they came to power in 2001. With the broad political support from business, civil society and the poor, the TRT government had the chance to address the fundamental social inequalities that structure Thai society. After they missed this historical moment, it seems today that this window of opportunity has closed. However, with King Bhumibol reigning for over 60 years now, the political question 'who or what should represent the Thai nation?' will be an issue sooner or later.

#### 4.3. Comparison

We argued that the myth of world culture can be analyzed along three dimensions: time as progress, space as global/local distinction, and ethics as connected to the rational individual. Together, these dimensions provide a coherent model for ordering social reality. In the case of 'Golden Rice', a world cultural myth is contested by narratives which follow a different mythological logic. It reveals how the amalgamation of contending narratives like rationality and philanthropy or religion influence the understanding of the normative dimension of agricultural biotechnology. Actors draw on different myths to legitimize their interests in debates on biotechnology. These myths form a diffuse meaning of this norm instead of its simple diffusion according to the world culture approach. In the case of Thailand, deviations from the world cultural model cannot be explained as a somehow incomplete enactment of world culture in a local setting. Rather, it opens a field of contending myths which co-exist besides the world cultural myth pointing to different ways of ordering social reality. The current political crisis in Thailand reveals the complex interplay of contending myths in the local adaption of the norm of state sovereignty. This institutionalized world cultural norm is *at the same time* deeply embedded in cosmological beliefs about legitimate authority. Political power was directly linked to a

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<sup>17</sup> The Thai-Cambodian border dispute over the *Preah Vihear* temple can be regarded as another such instance. This conflict resulted in a military clash between Thai and Cambodian military forces in October 2008 (Meyer 2009). For Cambodia, this temple constitutes a national symbol as an important *lieu de mémoire* for Cambodia's national myth of origin – the glorious Angkorean past. For Thailand, it represents the imagination of a great tradition of conquest as the Western provinces of Cambodia were once part of the Thai kingdom in the 19th century.

cosmological image of a just order. These Buddhist myths of origin made sense of the various interconnections between the natural and the supernatural world.

In both cases social actors selectively draw on contending myths in order to provide a coherent model of social reality. Reconstructing these myths along the dimensions of time, space and ethics opens the perspective on a contested discursive field. Interestingly, in the case of ‘Golden Rice’ and in Thailand, the myth of world culture is being challenged by narratives which point to the working of a contending myth. Along our analytical categories of myth, the temporal dimension points to a circularity and cosmology, the spatial dimension highlights local practices in a global-local divide and the ethical dimension reveals (re-)enchantment narratives. These contending myths do not proceed from a rationalized, disenchanting world in the Weberian sense but built on a cosmological understanding of a holistic world-view. This means that otherworldly forces like spirits or ancestors impact worldly affairs and are addressed in various social practices, i.e. rituals or religious beliefs. The parallel working of a world cultural myth and indigenous myths opens the possibility for social actors to draw on different narratives to legitimate their practices. These processes of re-signification lead to the amalgamation of narratives, which originally followed different logics. Their interaction and mutually enriching character make the contested norms increasingly diffuse and lead to an understanding of a norm which is grounded on different myths.

## **5. Conclusion**

Our focus on local normative change sheds light on an under-researched aspect of norm diffusion processes. The two case studies point to different mechanisms at play in the processes of norm diffusion. The debates about the introduction of ‘Golden Rice’ in India reveal that actors use different legitimizing strategies in discourses connected to contending myths of both rationality and religious and postcolonial narratives. In Thailand, state sovereignty is a deeply institutionalized but contested norm. Traditional narratives based on myths about the cosmological order of the world are invoked to endow a national project of state sovereignty with moral legitimacy. Overall, our case studies reveal the existence, importance and surprising resilience of myths which are predicated on different conceptions of cosmological order.

Meyer and Rowan noticed in their work (1977) that conflicts may arise in the ceremonial adaption of world cultural models, conceptualized as an institutionalized myth. Actors react to

these inconsistencies by only loosely adapting to the ceremonial requirements of world culture. In this reading of norm diffusion processes, world culture – based on the functionalist myth of rationality – is taken for granted and assumed to be universally valid. World culture is not only the cognitive model legitimating the taking of norms in norm diffusion. At the same time, it permeates theoretical models on norm diffusion as they reflect the working of the myth by displaying a linear model of temporal progression, reifying a global/local divide which privileges the former. It naturalizes a model of morality which focuses on the rational individual. A functionalist perspective on the deterministic working of myths in norm diffusion does not pay enough attention to social practices and contending narratives. By not questioning the powerful Western myth of rationality, one obstructs the view on subaltern myths, which play an important role as discursive resources in social practices. Taking an area study perspective, which considers the specific local contexts, allows challenging and critically examining the assumptions of the world culture approach. Leaving the close boundaries of IR behind, an area study approach enables us to shed light on the underresearched aspects of local normative change. Area studies special knowledge of local social practices helps to take discursive as well as ritual practices of social actors into account. With this knowledge, in norm research, we can obtain a better understanding of the discursive embeddedness of dynamic norm adaption processes. In our cases, this exposes modernist myths of rationality as reflecting a specifically Western perspective and works to destabilize their naturalizing effects.

A closer dialogue between IR and area studies allows a better grasp of the contestedness of norms as “meaning-in-use”. We contend that myths do not only account for the diffusion of norms; rather, the interplay of contending myths permits us to study the diffuse character of norms. The power of a myth follows from its ability to order social reality in a specific way. Obviously, world culture offers a very powerful model of social reality. The myth of world culture provides us with the illusion that change is possible and that rational social actors can change the world. It is tempting to succumb to this modernist view of an ever more rationalizing world that seems – at least to us – to be so prevalent in research on norm diffusion. Yet, this perspective might obstruct our view on contending myths which draw on alternative cosmological and holistic models to order social reality which provide a very appealing offer for social actors to identify with. Overcoming the close boundaries of disciplines and integrating an area study

perspective into IR norm research is important to reveal that effectively, it is the desire of social actors to create order of a complex reality that still leaves some space for subaltern myths in an apparently disenchanted world.

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