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Impressions from the Workshop “Unbuilding Binaries: Exploring Affective and Analytical Responses to Binary Divisions as Encountered in the Field”

Drivalda Delia, Frederik Lange, Daniela Mathuber, Thalia Prokopiou, Eva-Maria Walther, and Vita Zelenska

The graduate students who formed the organizing team of the workshop “Unbuilding Binaries” discuss the papers’ contributions to critical discussions on the ongoing impact of binary oppositions on scholarship, conceptual frameworks and fieldwork. The presentations in November 2020 considered how researchers not only encounter binary oppositions based on gender and geography, among other factors, but also how they might counter them in constructing analytical frameworks and presenting empirical research. Discussing the importance of the scales employed in research, they find that particular case studies can form the basis for a nuanced, bottom-up challenge to larger-scale binary oppositions. Efforts to unbuild binaries could be particularly effective when coupled with self-reflection on the affective processes that researchers experience in the field, in archives or at their desks. At the same time, the workshop offered insight into the strategic, affirmative potential of binaries as modes of making sense of the world and constructing identities.

The event was the inaugural Graduate Workshop organized by GSOSES UR in collaboration with the Leibniz-ScienceCampus. A second workshop is scheduled for December 2021. The [CfP on “Contested Sovereignties”](#) is open until 19 September 2021.



Impressions from the Workshop “Unbuilding binaries: Exploring affective and analytical responses to binary divisions as encountered in the field”

On November 26th and 27th 2020, the Graduate School for East and Southeast European Studies (Regensburg) and the Leibniz ScienceCampus Europe and America in the Modern World held their first joint graduate workshop “Unbuilding binaries: Exploring affective and analytical responses to binary divisions as encountered in the field”. The workshop focused on the unbuilding of persisting binaries in fieldwork and archival research with a particular focus on the affective relationships of the researcher with the field.

Discussions on social media have noted the emergence of echo-chambers, where we increasingly tend to communicate with like-minded people while vilifying all ‘others’ who think differently. The middle ground shrinks and antagonisms grow. This dynamic of polarization in contemporary societies is also reflected in the way that binaries stemming from the Enlightenment, based on the division between Nature and Culture, are reimposed. Even though these binaries have been the subject of profound critique, they linger on in various related and persistent binaries, including gender (women being associated with Nature and men with Culture), geographical (East/West, North/South), and local/migrant divisions. This workshop problematized the process of blurring or dissolving binaries by focusing on the affective relationships we as researchers develop with our fieldwork topics or archival research by including our emotional and bodily responses to binaries in the analysis.

The organizing team proposed the topic of unbuilding binaries as binary oppositions are something that concerns many disciplines and that many of us engage with in our research as well as our lives beyond science. In this text, we elaborate some of the most important insights we gained from the workshop. The full programme can be [found here](#).

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Themes and questions

The multidisciplinary character of this graduate conference, featuring views on binaries from several fields, promoted knowledge exchange among the participants and organizers, as well as flexibility of thought, creativity, and inspiration for individual research projects. Last, but not least, the graduate conference offered opportunities for participants together with the organizers to expand their understanding of various concepts and methods, including autoethnography and public pedagogy in relation to binarizations that date back to the Enlightenment and continue to serve as the basis for

oppression, such as gender binaries, the division into locals and migrants, and geographical binaries.

The fact that the workshop participants not only came from different disciplines, but also possessed a broad variety of institutional affiliations, geographical backgrounds and biographical experiences showed that it is possible to contribute to the unbuilding of binaries by paying attention to the way binaries are entangled with individual scholars' standpoints. For example, the discussions following the presentations by Katerina Ivanova ("(Un)building the Berlin Wall: Thinking about Eastern Germany with and beyond the binaries") and Shuyang Song ("Overcoming Binary Representations of the GDR: A case study of the Zeitgeschichtliches Forum Leipzig") made us aware that the East-West polarization presents itself in a completely different manner when viewed from (West) Germany or from the former GDR, from Belarus, or China. Depending on the perspective, geographical binaries change, become marginalized or more differentiated – and this exposes them as well as other types of binaries as constructed.

Categorizations and research processes

The challenge in dealing with binaries in research involves finding a balance between individual cases and categories that would enable avoiding the cruder binaries while problematizing the more intricate ones without getting lost in details and idiosyncrasies of single cases.

The most fundamental issue for discussion was when and how binaries manifest themselves in the trajectory of a particular research project. The processes of building and unbuilding binaries seem to be linked on the one hand to changing degrees of familiarity with the research topic, and on the other hand to consecutive stages of research. Projects, even those on a narrowly defined topic, necessarily set out from rather global and schematic assumptions because finer nuances are supposed to be the result of research. Thus, at an early stage, scholars are prone to using rough categorizations that can be in some way binary.

It is only during later stages of research that we find specific sources, conduct single interviews or make particular observations that contradict our erstwhile assumptions and call into question the binaries associated with them. Thus, it is the single cases that bear the greatest potential to unbuild the binaries that built up during the process of conceptualizing a research project.

At the same time, the necessity to differentiate and pay attention to specific cases does not mean that we could do without general conclusions. To some degree, we have to make generalizations and use categories of different sorts to link our research to a greater whole – be it a field of study, a discipline or something else. The challenge in dealing with binaries in research involves finding a balance between individual cases and categories that would enable avoiding the cruder binaries while problematizing the

more intricate ones without getting lost in details and idiosyncrasies of single cases.

Chances/ opportunities/ benefits/ subversive potential of unbuilding binaries

The workshop provided ample opportunity to deliberate on how this delicate balance can be achieved, and to examine both the chances and challenges of unbuilding binaries with due diligence.

The presentations delivered a broad range of evidence for the epistemological potential of engaging critically with binaries. Firstly, making the affective process which the researcher undergoes while unbuilding binaries transparent is an effective and engaging way of disclosing the difficulty, complexity and sometimes painfulness of this endeavor. It allows for a mode of knowledge production that is not solely directed at amassing facts but making affective states accessible to recipients. The introduction of multisensorial material, like sound recordings or artistic engagements with the topic, into research presentations is a good way to do this.

It also became clear that even accounts that aim to be differentiated and critical of commonplace binaries risk reinforcing stereotypes or perpetuating the very categories they seek to displace merely by restating that these distinctions are being made. Researchers often take for granted that certain binaries are problematic and thus fail to make it sufficiently clear throughout their texts that they are describing binaries as *emic* (according to Kenneth Pike (1954): belonging to the field, from the perspective of the subject) entities, rather than making them part and parcel of their analysis.

Several presentations that understand the process of unbuilding binaries as complex work made visible the capitalist use of binaries. Oppositions such as local and migrant or man and woman serve to divide spaces for the sake of profit under conditions of postcolonial distant capitalism. They can be questioned and overturned through various resources: through humor, which makes the very juxtapositions and binarizations laughable and thus unstable (Daria Prydybaylo with the performance “Healing anti-capitalistic mantra which helps you welcome your hysterical (non)white self”, Lucy Spoliar’s presentation “Humour and the de/reconstruction of binaries? A reflection on representations of Muslim women in British comedy”); through feminist critique of work with local communities (Irina Shirobokova “Dealing with duplicitous dichotomies of uneven development”); to the critique of the Racial Police-Capitalocene in Russia (Sasha Shestakova “Where do I speak from exactly?”). This is the work which is being done by many of our presenters and they can be proud of it notwithstanding all the complications and difficult feelings.

One example of unbuilding together with possible perspectives for alternative futures is presented in Sasha Shestakova’s contribution to *Frictions, Racial Capitalocene Binaries: Approaching environmental destruction in the Russian context*. Here she focuses on the Nature/Culture binary and its implications for the capitalist use of indigenous lands in Northern Russia. She finds solutions in the potential for

building new universalities: rather than the binaries that capture the macrolevel in capitalist patriarchal interests, she argues that it is partial truths that could shape the world in new constellations.

Risks and challenges in unbuilding binaries

Researchers may experience that binaries that restrict their freedom, cripple their identity and limit the ability to reflect on positionality, are the same binaries others experience as meaningful distinctions and as necessary categories to make sense of their world.

The discussions at the workshop also revealed a number of issues that complicate the scholarly engagement with binaries and deserve further scrutiny. A perpetual challenge is the positionality of the scholar in relation to the topic and the field: entrapped in a position where struggling with binarization is unavoidable but staying out of it is impossible, too. One example of dealing with such challenges is the presentation by Priyanka Hutschenreiter (“Thinking about class and religiosity through spacetime”) where she discussed her relationship with the urban field in Dhaka, Bangladesh. There, both the secular and religious worlds are parts of her own experience and partially relate to her self-identification. Another presentation that related to a similar conundrum of positionality was by Selbi Durdiyeva (“Theorizing binaries through autoethnography, self-reflection and positionality”), where she studied religious groups engaged in grassroots memory initiatives in Russia. Although ethically she is dedicated to unbuilding, the family-like generosity and hospitality of the interlocutors, her very corporeal presence and affection for these people creates a bodily attachment and makes the unbuilding more personal, and thus, more problematic.

Very often, researchers cannot separate themselves from their field as something takes part in binarization because of affective or cultural reasons. The emotional relations with the field become more complex through the participation of the body, through hospitality or through one’s own attachments and beliefs. While the impossibility of keeping one’s distance from dangerous binarizations may look scary, this very act of non-separation, of the impossibility of being fully detached, also shows how the researcher is not superior or omniscient. This state helps to avoid the objectification of one’s field of study and look for the deeper reasons for certain binarizations, such as the economy, inequality, and the production of space for profit. The contributions to the workshop illustrate the complexity of positionality and its advantages.

The negative affective relationship with binaries that many researchers display deserves our attention as well. Oftentimes, we as scholars are uncomfortable with binaries that affect ourselves, which is why we start out researching them in the first place, while persons in the field may tend to hold on to them.

Researchers may experience that binaries that restrict their freedom, cripple their identity and limit the ability to reflect on positionality, are the same binaries others experience as meaningful distinctions and as necessary categories to make sense of their world. What are the emotional repercussions when interlocutors affirm the categories researchers experience as restricting freedom? Is it possible or advisable to analyze these categories without value judgement? How can a language be found that is respectful of people's (self)classification but still problematizes them? We also need to ask ourselves truthfully if we would be able to let go of the urge to unbuild binaries when empirical material suggests it.

Last, but not least, in the presentations and discussions, it became clear that unbuilding binaries bears the risk of watering down distinctions that hold real meaning or value for those contained in it, like for example perpetrator and victim, or local and migrant. Of course, none of these are absolute categories, as there are countless gradations or differentiations to these rigid classifications. But the distinctions are also needed to grant certain individuals access to particular resources while holding others accountable. The categories have important implications, amongst others, for legal proceedings, social benefits, and therapeutic work. Can the imaginary of the binary distinction be replaced with something else instead of abandoning it altogether? Do different visualizations that are based on a distinction between nearness and distance (spectrum, scale, continuum) help, or do they only relocate the problem? What ways are there of talking about difference without linguistic cues of spatial situatedness?

Conclusions

Despite all these challenges, the participants agreed that unbuilding binaries is well worth the effort – as long as we are conscious of our respective incentives. It is necessary to distinguish between epistemological and ethical motivations while engaging with binaries critically. Sometimes binaries provide only severely deficient accounts of the subject matter we want to describe: The classification into right-wing and left-wing, conservative and liberal, religious and non-religious are simplifications that demand a closer look. At other times, as in the case of the gender binary and the distinction between citizen and non-citizen, the binary order is all too real, verifiably causing suffering and oppression. Identifying these harmful effects confronts researchers with an ethical demand to work towards their dismantlement.

Examples of unbuilding binaries and when to do so depend – among other factors – on the research question, the field, the stage of the research project, and the researcher's self-awareness. The latter is always important when it comes to identifying the researcher's biases. However, it is also important for each researcher to go beyond self-realization and instead take action by making informed decisions about their research. The workshop inspired the participants to share with each other how they

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approach the question “What comes after awareness?”, acknowledging that this question has no definite answer but does stimulate a continuous critical thought process.

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