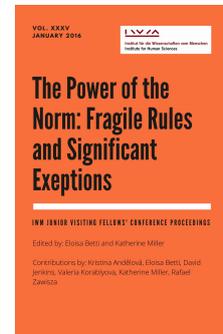


The Power of the Norm: Fragile Rules and Significant Exceptions: Introduction

Eloisa Betti, Katherine Miller

IWM Junior Visiting Fellows' Conference Proceedings, Vol. XXXV © 2016 by the author

Readers may redistribute this article to other individuals for noncommercial use, provided that the text and this note remain intact. This article may not be reprinted or redistributed for commercial use without prior written permission from the author. If you have any questions about permissions, please contact the IWM.



Certain exceptions, it is said, prove the rule. This has sometimes been understood to mean that identifying a given instance of a phenomenon as exceptional implies the existence of a rule to which it does not conform. The exception may then direct our attention to special circumstances under which the rule does not apply. Alternatively, under an older meaning of the word 'prove,' the phrase suggests that exceptional cases test or call into question taken-for-granted rules or expectations. Given that even analytical or theoretical categories are often freighted with normative or moral significance, the stakes of such questioning may extend well beyond its contributions to scholarly knowledge. And as the history of the 20th century, along with more recent events, has amply demonstrated, the designation of particular cases, circumstances or persons as exceptions has political implications; for instance, a recently prominent strand of political philosophy expands on the idea of the 'state of exception' to elucidate the significance of the power to exclude in constituting the political order (Schmitt 1995; Agamben 2005).

The status of the exception and the questions that exceptions raise about the respective rules in relation to which they stand apart served as the provocation to which the 2015-16 visiting junior fellows at the IWM crafted our responses. The resulting papers and the generous responses of our discussants raised, as might be expected when such a collaborative effort such as this goes well, an even greater range of questions than the participants first envisioned. As sociologist Steven Lukes pointed out, the very designation of some state of affairs as exceptional implies the existence of some norm that establishes a set of expectations. But what is the nature of the norm and its resulting expectations? A norm may be derived from generalization; a statement of what is *normal* in descriptive or statistical terms. As such it makes at least implicit reference to some moment in time, extension of space or relevant population. On the other hand, a norm may acquire its force from theory or from some *normative* standpoint—someone's situated, intellectually, ideologically or morally- freighted idea of what is or should be the case. Norms, as Lukes notes, must therefore always be understood in relation to questions of *positionality*. Furthermore, as the papers collected here all deal in some way with

concepts that are contested, the positions we take and the resulting judgements about exceptions and their normative background must be recognized as always politically consequential (see Lukes 2005).

Not least of these political implications of the creation and reproduction of normative orders is the creation of a certain “we” from whose perspective the world looks a certain way. Any norm is, from this point of view, ideological; it represents the view from a particular position in a political system, and indeed may be instrumental in the creation and dissemination of such a view. The remarks of the anthropologist Shalini Randeria touched on the relationship between exceptions and a certain kind of norm; the (putative) universal. Attention to the construction of universals reminds us that all such universals are constructed *in a particular way*. As such they generate exceptions of particular kinds. We are asked to pay attention to exceptions not only in the form of things but of actions. Engaging with the literature on resistance, Randeria points to the distinction between *insurgency* or *exceptional*, spectacular forms of resistance and more everyday forms of resistance to normative orders. She asks: how do we notice and foreground such everyday exceptions or objections to the status quo?

Likewise, geographer Luiza Bialasiewicz calls our attention to the very process of defining cases—to the processes of *problematization* and *eventualization*—which precede and are implicated in the designation of phenomena as exceptional. How do we pick our cases? How do we consider cases— how do we approach them analytically? And how do we come to identify them as cases in the first place? Here too we cannot escape the political dimension of our choices. Bialasiewicz asks how we as scholars can go beyond the assumptions with which all judgements about norms and exceptions are freighted, the taken-for-granted hegemonic model of understanding of the social world, and how do we think about other possibilities for conceptualization? How do we open up the exception and situate it as a challenge to the norm and the normal in our own ways of engaging with and studying such cases?

The papers brought together in this conference explore the possible meanings and uses of the *exception* and its contrary, the *norm*, in a variety of disciplinary perspectives and research contexts. The papers have been gathered in three different sections according to the research questions they address. In doing so, IWM Junior Fellows have shaped their own approaches to the issue of exception/norm, combining empirical and theoretical modes of research. Fellows’ efforts to address a shared provocation with their specific case studies have been a crucial added value in the shaping of the conference and this resulting volume overall.

One set of papers investigates to what extent an exception can be defined as such in opposition to a normal situation or a normative model that has been taken for granted. Following this stream, Eloisa Betti’s paper compares and contrasts the different interpretations of the role of precarious work – as norm or exception – in the history of capitalism. Moreover, the moral implications of following societal norms and the subversive potential of exceptional actions are explored in David Jenkin’s paper, by

focusing on moments of justice/morality. Rafael Zawisza, instead, analyses the potential of Arendt's concept of ordinary exception in looking at the historical experience of Jews in Europe prior to the Second World War.

A second theme concerned the way that dynamic social processes inform the perceptions and judgments of situated social actors about what is normal/normative or, alternatively, exceptional. Katherine Miller's paper, representing this approach, explores the relative value being attached to terms such as "universal" and "exceptional" by inhabitants of Hunza in the North of Pakistan as they engage with more broadly circulating representations of the valley and its people.

A third set of papers addresses the issue of exception by looking at how Europe was framed geopolitically after the fall of the bipolar world structure and what internal mutations happened afterwards. Kristina Andelova's paper investigates the exceptional value attached since the early 1980s to the concept of "Central Europe" and its cultural-political implications, while Valeria Korablyova analyses the EU project of Europe in terms of dynamics of inclusion – exclusion.

The contributors to these proceedings would like to thank those who acted as discussants during the conference: Shalini Randeria (Rector of IWM and Professor of Social Anthropology and Sociology at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (IHEID) in Geneva); Luiza Bialasiewicz (Jean Monnet Professor of EU External Relations at the University of Amsterdam and Visiting Fellow at IWM in 2015-16), and János M. Kovács (Permanent Fellow at IWM). Their generous and careful feedback greatly enhanced the conference and have informed many of our individual papers through subsequent revisions. We also thank Steven Lukes (Professor of Sociology at New York University and IWM Visiting Fellow in 2015-16) whose thoughtful remarks concluded the conference and further added to the papers. We, the organizers, also wish to thank all IWM staff, the discussants and our colleagues for their commitment in accepting the challenge of working together.

[Download as PDF](#)

Works Cited:

Agamben, Giorgio, *State of Exception*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005.

Lukes, Steven, *Power: A radical view*; 2nd edition, New York, Palgrave Macmillan 2005.

Schmitt, Carl, *Political Theology: Four chapters on the concept of sovereignty*, George Schwab (Trans.), Cambridge, MIT Press, 1922 (1985).

Preferred citation: Miller, Katherine, and Betti, Eloisa. 2016. Introduction. In: *The Power of the Norm: Fragile Rules and Significant Exceptions*, ed. E. Betti, K. Miller, Vienna: IWM Junior Visiting Fellows' Conferences, Vol. 35.