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# Conference Report:

## Neopatrimonialism, Democracy, and Party Research: The German and International Debate

### In Remembrance of Gero Erdmann (1952–2014)

Marianne Kneuer, Andreas Mehler, and Jonas Sell

**Abstract:** This report summarises the presentations held at a symposium that took place on 8 June 2015 in Hamburg to commemorate the life and scholarly achievements of Gero Erdmann. Erdmann has left deep footprints in the literature on neopatrimonialism, parties, and party systems in Africa, as well as on democratisation, including democracy promotion. Colleagues and former collaborators revisited some of his work and put it in the perspective of recent findings in the literature.

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**Marianne Kneuer** is a professor of Political Science at the University of Hildesheim.

E-mail: <kneuer@uni-hildesheim.de>

**Andreas Mehler** is the director of the Institute of African Affairs at the GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Hamburg. With Henning Melber he co-edits the journal *Africa Spectrum*, published by the GIGA.

E-mail: <andreas.mehler@giga-hamburg.de>

**Jonas Sell** is a student of Political Science (MA programme) at the University of Münster.

E-mail: <jonas\_sell@gmx.de>

This event, jointly organised by the German Institute of Global and Area Studies (GIGA) and the “Democracy Studies” Working Group of the German Political Science Association (DVPW), assembled companions, colleagues, friends, and family of the late Gero Erdmann, who held important positions at both the GIGA and the DVPW. Erdmann’s main research interests – party politics, democracy, and neopatrimonialism – were at the heart of this conference. Erdmann’s drive to do two things in parallel – to disprove Africa’s alleged exceptionalism while working towards the adaptation of universal approaches in light of his deep insights into many African cases – made him a respected scholar both in African Studies and Comparative Politics.

At the conference’s outset, Robert Kappel, the GIGA’s former president, elucidated Erdmann’s unfortunately rather typical German academic career path, which entailed a long time passing before he finally got a permanent position and the recognition he deserved. He became the head of GIGA Research Programme 1: Legitimacy and Efficiency of Political Systems, and later headed up the GIGA’s office in Berlin. Kappel highlighted in particular Erdmann’s role as a mentor for many young researchers who benefitted from his experience and expertise.

In the first thematic block on party research, Matthias Basedau (GIGA) explained what new perspectives a Comparative Area Studies (CAS) lens could bring to party research, all along paying tribute to Erdmann’s work. CAS can serve as the – for quite some time “missing” – link between classical Area Studies and Comparative Politics, as it seeks a balance between generalisation and individualisation, between induction and deduction. Basedau illustrated this added value by reference to party research on Africa, one essential element being the adequate description of parties and party systems in Africa. Erdmann applied and adapted universal typologies of political parties (e.g. Gunther and Diamond 2003) and party systems (Sartori 1976). He had experimented with his own typology, particularly focusing on both “mono-ethnic parties” and “ethnic congress parties” (Erdmann 2004, 2007) while showing that dominant-party *systems* are the most common type of party system in sub-Saharan Africa (Erdmann and Basedau 2007, 2013). Beyond the description of parties and party systems, a CAS approach allows for the isolation of causal relationships in specific contexts. Erdmann et al. (Erdmann 2007; Basedau, Erdmann, Lay, and Stroh 2011) found that ethnicity can explain voting behaviour – to some extent. Nevertheless, there were significant differences between – the examined countries with regard to the explanatory power of ethnicity. On a higher cross-regional level, Köllner, Basedau, and Erdmann (2007) compared African and non-African cases, examining the

causes of factionalism within parties and whether this factionalism affected the stability of parties and party systems in democracies. The aspiration of CAS to combine universal compatibility with context sensitivity stresses the need for a variety of methods; from this perspective, it is most appropriate to fuse qualitative and quantitative methods on the micro- as well as the macro-level.

Sebastian Elischer (Leuphana University/GIGA) gave an overview of recent research results on African parties, showing how strongly the field has developed since Erdmann's statements from the 1990s deploring the lack of discussion on African parties and party systems in the international literature (after somewhat stronger coverage in the 1960s and 1970s). With the third wave of democratisation, Africa had once again become fertile ground for party research, noted early on by Erdmann. However, he continued to criticise the lack of theoretical and conceptual clarity (Erdmann 1999, 2004). Elischer proved Erdmann's early predictions to be accurate by referring to recent literature appearing in prominent publishing houses (LeBas 2011; Fleischhacker 2010; Pitcher 2012; Elischer 2013; Riedl 2014; Resnick 2014; Osei 2012; Stroh 2014; Doorenspleet and Nijzink 2014). Recent work produced new insights into the influence of identities on parties, though in a differentiated way. Ethnicity has a huge influence on the process of party formation in some African countries but not in others. Party research in Africa is no longer marginalised – also thanks to Erdmann's pioneering work, which shaped the research agenda for over a decade.

Alexander Stroh (University of Bayreuth) explored the nexus of party systems and electoral competition in Africa, focusing on the case of Benin. He showed that Sartori's characterisation of African party systems as a labyrinth (1976) cannot simply be denied. At first sight, there is a highly fragmented and polarised party system in Benin. However, a glance at the subnational level reveals a different reality. Today there is enough data on the level of subnational competition – which is arguably essential for the overall level of democracy, though not all methods exploiting such data work well. Stroh proposed looking at four essential aspects on a micro-level: fragmentation, competitiveness, polarisation, and institutionalisation of parties. Such a deeper analysis of subnational structures shows that in over two-thirds of Benin's electoral districts only two lists got mandates. Competitiveness is normatively desirable within a democracy; the level of uncertainty of who would win at the constituency level is a key factor – Stroh applied the Grofman/Selb (2009) Index of Competition here. He showed that Blais' thesis that competition increases voter turnout (2006) does not apply in this case. Voter turnout declined in Benin's National

Assembly elections from 1995 to 2015 while the Index of Competition increased. Existing analytical instruments to measure the polarisation of party systems often do not consider political stockpiling – an especially important feature in African presidential systems like Benin’s.

The second conference block focused on the uses and usefulness of neopatrimonialism as a concept. Ulf Engel (University of Leipzig) portrayed the refinement and critique of the concept of neopatrimonialism in recent academic debates, relying on a common understanding of the term as “a mixture of two types of domination that coexist: namely, patrimonial and legal-rational bureaucratic domination” (Erdmann and Engel 2007). He took issue with a number of recent statements of colleagues – for instance, that neopatrimonialism is a valid universalistic paradigm (Bach 2011) or a concept that simply needs updating (de Waal 2014). Neopatrimonialism as a concept is being increasingly criticised: as “analytically inadequate” (Olivier de Sardan 2014), as a “severe misreading of Weber” (Pitcher, Moran, and Johnston 2009), as not having predictive power with respect to economic policy and performance (Mkandawire 2013), and as a Eurocentric concept (Wai 2012). Engel underlined Erdmann’s growing scepticism towards the concept for its lack of clarity, its difficulty to operationalise, and its failure to provide convincing subtypes. However, Erdmann still insisted that the concept had heuristic value in the absence of better options to grasp the “widespread phenomenon of the interaction between formal institutions and informal behaviour and/or institutions in politics” (Erdmann 2013). Engel supported this view; neopatrimonialism seems to help describe realities in Africa and other world regions, but contains in itself severe obstacles for operationalisation and analytical clarity and is also flawed due to its underlying normative assumptions, which present practical problems.

André Bank and Thomas Richter (both GIGA) applied their understanding of neopatrimonialism to the different fates of various regimes within the Arab Spring. In Middle East Studies, neopatrimonialism is dominantly portrayed as an authoritarian subtype, whereas Erdmann and others would stress the mixture of patrimonial and legal-rational bureaucratic domination as described by Engel. Bank and Richter find personalisation essential, finding indisputable salience in the head of state’s relationship with the elite – meaning, the role of a central political actor and ultimate decision maker in the context of elite pluralism (and competition) and his or her ability to ensure a balance of power via an elite rotation. They applied their model to five republics (Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Syria, Tunisia) and three monarchies (Jordan, Morocco, Oman). The attitude of the ruler towards elite pluralism and rotation would help

explain outcomes of the Arab Spring – relative stability (Jordan, Morocco, Oman) versus transformation (Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Syria, Tunisia). Bank and Richter noted that in every single case, the rulers tried to appoint their sons or other relatives as their successors. This narrowing of the elite resulted in a decreasing elite rotation and a deficient power balance. Despite these similarities, there are also significant differences in regard to the influence and structure of the elite and the opposition in the power game. The focus on the relationship between ruler and elites as key aspect of neopatrimonialism is therefore helpful, but still needs refinement, not least with regard to the military as a special actor evincing a very different functional logic than other elite segments. Agency, more generally, is not easy to cover using existing concepts of neopatrimonialism.

Christian von Soest (GIGA) also tackled the question of to what extent neopatrimonialism is analytically applicable beyond Africa. He relied on insights from a research project that had been initiated by Erdmann and conducted by von Soest. Deduced from a certain branch of the discussion on sub-Saharan Africa (Bratton and van de Walle 1997), Erdmann and von Soest used three dimensions – informal concentration of power, systemic clientelism, and corruption – to reveal differences between Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia. They encountered several challenges concerning the interregional transfer of the concept: First, there was the question of how to measure informal institutions. Second, the concept's applicability was challenged in the Latin American political context by colleagues from the region. Moreover, the case-study character of the research rendered a generalisation beyond any given region very difficult. On a descriptive level, it became obvious that the forms and magnitudes of patron–client networks varied greatly. Although taking a very different perspective on neopatrimonialism than Bank and Richter, von Soest came to a similar conclusion: the concept of neopatrimonialism is deficient in its integration of actor behaviour. There are cases in which decision makers acted very differently within similar structures. According to von Soest, it is necessary to step down the abstraction ladder from investigating at the regime level to conducting comparative research on specific questions focusing on certain policy areas or administrations. Such a more specific approach could lead, in his view, to a more systematic examination of “type of rule” that would also take into account regional peculiarities.

The third part of the conference dealt with the issue of hybridity and the future of democracy. Marianne Kneuer (University of Hildesheim) showed that the whole branch of research on external factors of

democratisation, including democracy promotion, has experienced a boom since 1989. While the 1990s constituted a period of optimistic belief in the normative and factual force of democracy accompanied by equally committed activities of external support for democratisation, the pendulum had swung to “democratic pessimism” a decade later (Carothers 2009). At the beginning of the twenty-first century, many democratic experiments produced disappointing results and a more general scepticism about the future of democracy set in globally. Moreover, the so-called “War on Terror” declared after 9/11 and the way George W. Bush conflated democracy promotion with the fight against Al Qaeda resulted in a loss of credibility of the overall democracy-promotion project. The more anti- (or pro-)democratic the environment is internationally, the smaller (or bigger) the willingness to promote democracy. In the current context within the West of giving priority to security and stability, the prospects for democracy promotion remain unfavourable. Current events in Libya, Syria, and Ukraine offer ambivalent messages for democracy supporters and promoters: On the one hand, they prove that democracy still has an immense appeal for citizens who are willing to fight for it. On the other hand, democratic uprisings do not necessarily result in democratic transitions but may instead lead to internal instability or even to civil war. They also prove that autocratic regimes feel threatened by democratic uprisings in their neighbourhood or even some distance away. As a consequence, autocratic regimes such as Russia or China not only pursue an aggressive foreign policy (McFaul and Spector 2010; Kneuer and Demmelhuber 2015) but also actively promote autocracy (Burnell and Schlumberger 2010; Burnell 2011; Jackson 2010). The IDCAR project,<sup>1</sup> the last big project Gero Erdmann co-initiated, investigates this counter-project to democracy promotion. Kneuer proposed investigating the international dimension of regime promotion more generally across the regime types (democracies, autocracies, hybrid regimes) in search for similarities and differences.

Hans-Joachim Lauth (University of Würzburg) began by seeking a definition for the term “hybrid” as something mingled, bundled, or crossed. Yet, hybrid more specifically refers, following Lauth, to the crossing even of “opposite” categories: ones not mutually derivable. Herein lies the central difference between a hybrid regime and a regular or diminished subtype: the latter always refers to a common central category (democracy or autocracy). Erdmann worked on such incongruous combinations, on neopatri-

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1 IDCAR (International Diffusion and Cooperation of Authoritarian Regimes) is a research network of scholars coordinated by the GIGA.

monialism, fragile states, and hybrid regimes. Applying his own thoughts about hybridity to regime classification, Lauth asked when it is possible to speak of hybrid regimes. According to the initial definition, hybrid regimes should have democratic as well as autocratic characteristics. Following Erdmann (2011), who used empirical data from Freedom House to highlight the relevance of hybrid regimes, one can show that democracies declined between 1974 and 2008 and morphed more often into hybrid regimes than into autocratic regimes. Based on data from the Polity IV Project (Center for Systemic Peace), Lauth underscored this result by his finding that the number of hybrid regimes – here called “anocracies” – conspicuously exceeds the number of autocracies today. Case studies have shown the existence of hybrid characteristics in certain regimes (e.g. Turkey, Russia, Venezuela). The empirical evidence is therefore clear: many cases cannot distinctively be assigned to the superior categories of democracy or autocracy. Lauth reported on his discussions with Erdmann about neopatrimonialism: Is it a regime or a form of government, or is it more of a praxis? What are the links between neopatrimonialism and regime types, particularly democracies? The structural weakness of the neopatrimonial state may have impeded successful democratisation in many cases (Erdmann 2003). Lauth proposed several avenues for future research – for example, on the identification of possible clusters of variables measuring hybrid regimes, on the relative stability of hybrid regimes, and on the concrete interactions between formal and informal institutions.

Wolfgang Merkel (WZB/Humboldt University) portrayed Erdmann as a comparativist, not an Area Studies scholar. According to him, Erdmann was always looking for theoretical concepts to recognise and interpret causes, structures, and developments beyond the descriptively tangible occurrences. Thus, Erdmann consciously applied “European” or “Western” concepts on his focus region Africa. However, he never did this scholastically but rather with the willingness to adapt these concepts with the objective of making them applicable to “his” region. Accordingly and rather classically, Erdmann outlined five key functions that must be fulfilled by parties in democracies: shaping elections, channelling corporate and organised interests, legislating in parliament, forming the executive, and making policy. Merkel, though aware of the generalisations inherent in the approach, then deployed this checklist back to OECD democracies commonly viewed as established and mature and found many weaknesses: elections, while being mostly general and free in OECD countries, fail frequently to be fair and equal – often as a consequence of electoral systems distorting the will of the voter. Channelling

corporate and organised interests is not a problem *per se* in today's OECD world, with many lobby groups directly influencing decision-making. However, there is the danger of an asymmetry occurring due to the different resources of such groups, resulting in the dominance of the capital side, which can severely restrict democratic standards; in such cases, future generations and low-income populations often remain underrepresented in the political process. With regard to the role of parties in parliamentary legislation, Merkel emphasised an observable shift in favour of the executive's role in legislation. The formation of government may have become more difficult in some OECD countries due to an increasing pluralisation and fragmentation of party systems, but the empirical evidence shows that since the 1980s the average duration of a government has not declined. Finally, Merkel noted the growing difficulty faced by elected party representatives in their ability to shape policies given the increasing influence of markets that are becoming evermore deregulated. Altogether, the trend is towards a decline in democracy in the OECD world – not a dramatic one, but visible nonetheless. Merkel discussed suggestions to counter this trend, including an increased number of popular votes, more deliberative mini-publics, greater civil-society and digital participation, and more cosmopolitanism, but remained wary of their effects.

The aforementioned contributions and the subsequent discussions held (which cannot be taken up in this conference report) highlighted the many connections between the topics across the three blocks. Neopatrimonialism represented either a context condition or a practice within and across political regimes, and the crucial role of political parties for both competition and elite formation was named as one of many important ingredients of democracy. The symposium testified to the outstanding contribution by Gero Erdmann to academic debates within and between Comparative Politics and African Studies by addressing central issues for Africa and at the same time transcending this regional focus in order to find more general explanations.

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### **Konferenzbericht:**

#### **Neopatrimonialismus, Demokratie und Parteienforschung: Die deutsche und internationale Debatte Zum Gedenken an Gero Erdmann (1952–2014)**

**Zusammenfassung:** Die Autoren des Berichts fassen die Vorträge eines Symposiums zusammen, das am 8. Juni 2015 im Gedenken an Persönlichkeit und wissenschaftliche Leistungen Gero Erdmanns in Hamburg abgehalten wurde. In der wissenschaftlichen Literatur zu Neopatrimonialismus, Parteien und Parteiensystemen in Afrika, aber auch zu Demokratisierung und Demokratieförderung hat Gero Erdmann tiefe Spuren hinterlassen. Kollegen und frühere Mitarbeiter Erdmanns griffen wesentliche Schwerpunkte und Ergebnisse seiner Forschungen auf und analysierten sie im Lichte aktueller wissenschaftlicher Veröffentlichungen.

**Schlagwörter:** Deutschland, Politische Wissenschaft, Politische Theorie, Afrikanistik/Afrikaforschung