

Fraud, fake and make-believe

Transregional and transdisciplinary perspectives

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Email scammers act as if they want to share their riches with you. Madoff presented himself as Wall Street's canniest broker. Fake-artists like the Yes Men force us with their as-if claims to reconsider political assumptions. Pyramid schemes, Ponzi schemes and multi-level marketing travel from Asia to Africa and invite millions of people to partake in global capitalism. New communication technologies and the dissolution of borders allow more anonymous, transregional interactions, and therefore more potential for fraudulent make-believes as ever before.

In public discourse, fraud is a metaphor for social flaws, anxieties and insecurities. Frauds and fakes seem to reveal hidden truths about the global economy, politics and academia. Fraudsters are discussed as symptoms of social decay, as young rebels or as political heroes. However, fraud has rarely been the object of systematic research. Instead of using fraud as a metaphor to scandalize social phenomena, we invite contributors to consider frauds and as-if claims as social practices and to explore the normalities and imaginaries in which they are embedded. Which irritants, questions and insights does the study of fraud and make-believes offer for the social sciences and humanities? What do the works and creative strategies of con-artists and fake-artists reveal about transregional connections?

Fraudsters seem to have a better, more immediate grasp of perceptions and expectations than scholars; they do not contest but confirm – or even over-affirm – norms and imaginaries. Moreover, it is apparently becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish between the fraudulent and authentic, which urges us to study how actors create and struggle to maintain the boundaries between the two. Above all, fraud schemes (and fraudsters) travel from region to region, both following and amplifying the travel of certain ideas and models.

We welcome contributions that seek to study fraudulent interactions and the discourses surrounding them in global capitalism, politics or art. How and why do these frauds and fakes work? What social realities do such make-believes draw on and reflect? How do we study interactions in which the actors are partly criminal, are located in different regions, or only communicate online? What is the heuristic value of such as-if-claims for social science? What ideas and narratives travel from region to region in the form of frauds and fakes? Instead of normative research, we aim for ethnographic research on the normative universe that frauds are embedded in, ranging from ideologies of capitalism to ethnic networks. We are looking forward to jointly develop a field of study that brings together anthropology, sociology, history, literary studies and other social sciences and humanities, using fraud as a lens to explore an increasingly transregionally-connected world.

Please submit your abstract of not more than 300 words to the organizers (kilian@uni-mainz.de) by July 24 and your full paper no later than November 14, 2016. Discussions and findings from the workshop are intended for publication. Funding may be available to cover participants' travel expenses and accommodation. The workshop is organized by the project Africa's Asian Options (AFRASO), Goethe University Frankfurt, and the Department of Anthropology and African Studies, Johannes Gutenberg-University Mainz.