



Iwo Amelung, Hartmut Leppin, Christian A. Müller (eds.)

DISCOURSES OF WEAKNESS AND RESOURCE REGIMES

Trajectories of a New Research Programm

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Discourses of Weakness and Resource Regimes

Edited by Iwo Amelung, Moritz Epple, Hartmut Leppin,
and Susanne Schröter

Volume 1

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Discourses of Weakness and Resource Regimes

Trajectories of a New Research Programme

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A Word from the Editors

The acquisition and distribution of resources is one of the central challenges of our times. Survival, as well as the seizing of development opportunities, compels actors—be they states, groups or individuals—to use resources to achieve their objectives. The continuous inequality (and what economists frequently refer to as scarcity) in the distribution of resources throughout history, is also the cause for numerous individual, social and international conflicts. This constitutes a challenge for academic research: how do actors refer to their situation in terms of their usage of resources? How do they talk about their deficiencies? This very connection is the starting point for the present series *Discourses of Weakness and Resource Regimes*. Discourses that deal with weakness are a phenomenon that can be observed in all societies at all times. Frequently, those discourses are directly connected to the question of agency and the required resources. Employing a humanities perspective, the series examines the problem of how discourses of weakness influence the deployment and usage of resources. It delves into the question of how actors' self-description and self-assessment impact on and shape the handling and usage of resources.

The English and German texts in this series combine contributions from historians, cultural studies specialists and philosophers on the multifaceted changes of resource processes encompassing the evaluation, acquisition and handling of resources. It seeks to avoid a narrow understanding of resources, and, for instance, a conceptual bifurcation between natural and immaterial resources, and hopes to find robust and resilient alternatives to such distinctions. It is expected that the research results will help to further develop existing concepts of transformation and thus contribute to expanding approaches of modelling substantial historical change. The series presents the research results of the Frankfurt Collaborative Research Center 1095 *Discourses of Weakness and Resource Regimes*, which sought to find and evaluate new approaches to the problem of resources.

Introduction

Ivo Amelung, Hartmut Leppin, and Christian A. Müller

I. Towards the Interdependence of Self-placements and Self-efficacy

The acquisition and distribution of resources is one of the central challenges of our times. Survival, as well as the seizing of development opportunities, compels actors—be they states, groups or individuals—both to use and to exploit resources in order to achieve their objectives. The continuous inequality (and, what economists prominently refer to as, scarcity) in the distribution of resources throughout history is also the cause for numerous individual, social and international conflicts. This constitutes a challenge for academic research: How do actors refer to the situation in which they find themselves in terms of their usage of resources? How do they talk about their deficiencies in resources? Beyond such phenomena of self-perception, the dimensions of practice and the conditions for action are also of interest: Which factors influence the agency of an actor, and how are these factors shaped? How—to sum up—can such a multi-layered phenomenon as the *configuration of capacity to act* be described?

Currently, different disciplines offer different answers: production factors (as in economics¹), resilience (as in psychology²), or majorities (as in political science³). Historical science stresses the contingency of the capacity to act, meaning the dependency on historically, culturally and geographically variable factors. The ability to act is always “socio-culturally” mediated,⁴ so it is not something that was available to the actors at all times, but was shaped differently at different times, and thus needs an explanation of its diverse occurrences. To register phenomena of this kind, analytical

1 Wöhe (2010), *Betriebswirtschaftslehre*, 28.

2 Karidi et al. (2018), *Resilienz*, 6.

3 Schubert et al. (2014), *Politikfeldanalyse*, 157.

4 Winiwarter et al. (2007), *Umweltgeschichte*, 131.

boundaries need to be set up: if we assume that the configuration of the capacity to act has always had a *practical* and *discursive* dimension, then this perspective will be unfolded at the Collaborative Research Center (CRC) 1095 via two concepts: on the practical side, we assume that resources are crucial. There is little doubt about the high relevance of resources in many disciplines. However, resources only indicate the *potential* of acting; they establish the possibility for actors to do or not do something. They are a necessary, but by no means satisfactory, explanation for the accomplishments of goals. For the question of the capacity to act, additional factors are of importance in which the self-placement and positioning of actors also come into play. These self-placements can vary greatly both in their general direction and in their intended direction of impact. Moreover, they are of special importance when they are about weakness because they then demand change. This opens up a wide field of research because weakness has been addressed in very different ways and in the light of several motives and agendas. Furthermore weakness always refers to their effects, which can be usefully illustrated through discourses about the downfall of Europe or the weakness of Chinese state at the turn of the twentieth century. In both cases, the problematisation of the situations in question changed the action of the actors, but in completely different, and sometimes unexpected, ways. The Europeans often described themselves as weak, despite their relatively strong position, whereas the Chinese, who perceived as deficient what was, in fact, to become the starting-point of an immense global power in the twenty-first century. We will model such complex self-placements, as well as their effects and consequences, as *discourses of weakness*. Clearly, they do not have to be directly about resources and can contain disparate diagnoses and inventories. But—and this is the crucial feature—they do have a general link to the dimension of activeness. While the realisation of strength is an invitation to continue on existing paths, diagnoses of weakness create—sometimes acute—pressure for change. This initial dynamic of change is important because it indicates situations in which actors examine and, if necessary, correct their positions, and—as a consequence—their concomitant use of resources. Yet, knowledge about the correlation between self-placements and the handling of resources is fairly scarce, which is why the CRC 1095 wants to explore this perspective.

From a natural sciences⁵ and economic perspective,⁶ but also in architecture or city-planning,⁷ it is both usual and obvious to think about resources. Practical problems of acquisition and processing prevail, while discursive examinations about weaknesses and strengths play a lesser role. In the face, for example, of a looming scarcity of water—one could pointedly say—that it is worthless to know what “opinions” exists about water. But many developments in history and in the world of today show that resources cannot be separated from positioning and deliberation. The close relationship between weakness and resource is even present on an encyclopedic level: The Oxford dictionary defines resources as “means of supplying some want or deficiency”.⁸ In economics and in the area of marketing and planning, the terms “resource analysis” and “strengths/weakness analysis” have long been used synonymously.⁹ For a perspective on resources, it is important not to identify them hastily with the weakness or strength categorisation. Resources cause no strength, just as a lack of resources causes no weakness *per se*. Instead of this, the aspect of enablement is crucial, and is also to be found in historical research: resources offer the *potential* for actions,¹⁰ but are not a guarantee of the capacity to act, and thus the general conditions, frameworks and interests become important. From this perspective, the view of resources becomes more complex and multi-layered: the utility of resources is steadily ambivalent, because they can be immensely precious as a part of a concrete course of action, while, on their own, they can be completely worthless. Resources are also polyvalent. The availability of a given resource for *different* purposes is a specific feature. Thus, the affordance of a resource has multiple characteristics. Finally, the handling of resources has paradoxical effects because, at the moment in which they present an opportunity to act, they also create dependencies that threaten the preservation of the opportunity.¹¹ In this way, enabling and endangering are somewhat similar. Since nobody can provide all the necessary resources on their own, the handling of resources is strongly shaped by such dependencies and ambivalences. Because of this

5 Neugebauer (2017), *Ressourceneffizienz*.

6 Müller-Christ (2011), *Sustainable Management*.

7 Hebel et al. (2017), *Beyond Mining*.

8 Oxford English Dictionary (1989), *Resource*, 730.

9 Dichtl et al. (1993), *Wirtschaftslexikon*, 1816.

10 See, for the aspect of potentiality, Jancke et al. (2015), *Ökonomie sozialer Beziehungen*, 17 ff.

11 The access constrains the opportunities for further access, see Luhmann (1988), *Wirtschaft der Gesellschaft*, 179.

starting-point, the use of resources is a highly non-determined process that needs description and explanation. Thus, the historic view on resources calls for a re-calibration: the focus is no longer on resources alone, but on resources as an initial point for regimes, which emphasises the embeddedness of their handling. To obtain a more complete insight into this embeddedness, the CRC 1095 not only focuses on well-known resource-based factors, such as scarcity or materiality, but also on the dimensions of self-awareness and self-assessment, which stresses the role of actors. The *framing of resources with a discursive approach* enables a perspective on correlative phenomena: discourses of weakness and strength possess the potential to irritate and change the handling of resources, which, in turn, can influence the original discourse. This interdependence, which can, of course, appear diversely, is the central of the CRC's research programme.

II. In Deficit: Discourses about Weakness and Strength

Within societies, deficits can be perceived in very different ways. Whether something is perceived as a deficit or not also differs. Concepts not only about the origin and the extent, but also about the consequences and the elimination of a deficit are, both historically and culturally, highly diverse. Discourses of weakness offer—in contrast to such phenomena as crisis,¹² failure,¹³ insecurity,¹⁴ and threat¹⁵—a to-date untested perspective on this matter. Like every conceptual term, discourses of weakness also need containment in order to remain meaningful when applied. This form of containment is called for both methodically and factually: as a research cluster, the number of sources varies greatly both in terms of epochs and in that of disciplines, since the research stretches from Mesopotamian traditions to ethnographic documentations. The methodical layout of discourses of weakness must therefore allow for cross-epochal identifications which contain ancient-Egypt scribes as well as the rich records of European expectations of decline. Practical aspects such as these also meet conceptual questions that beg to be answered: Is the simple lack of money or the loss

12 Mergel (2012), *Krisen verstehen*.

13 Köhler et al. (2012), *Pleitiers und Bankrotteure*.

14 Conze (2018), *Geschichte der Sicherheit*.

15 Frie et al. (2014), *Bedrohte Ordnung*.

of a battle already a referral to weakness? Here, the danger of inflations looms, because a lot of negative phenomena could be categorised as discourses of weakness.

Thus, the CRC 1095 has a broad concept of discourse, one which is understood as a thematic and specified organised context of assertions, while discourse analysis is understood as the re-construction of the regularity that determines the origin of these assertions.¹⁶ For the CRC 1095, the internal structure of the discourse is as relevant as its instrumental character to the question of to what purposes the discourses are subordinated. The starting-point for the discourse concept is thus not Foucault,¹⁷ but an opening towards a more prominent focus on actors. The role of actors when initiating, articulating and disseminating discourses of weakness is to be brought into focus, while, at the same time, bearing the specific contribution to the regularity of a discourse by an actor in mind. In this sense, discourses of weakness describe, as a working definition, the thematisation of deficiency, which is characterised by, at least, five aspects: a) discourses of weakness are *referential*, meaning they are thematic in the broadest sense. It is always someone or something (China, the West, the Hansa, a body of knowledge) that is described as weak; b) discourses of weakness are *relational*. Actors, situations or circumstances are put in relation to one another, not excluding fictitious or contra-factual references; c) discourses of weakness are *comparative*. The relations are compared and thereby enable the attribution of weakness;¹⁸ d) discourses of weakness are *positional*, they go hand in hand with processes of placing, which can happen for a variety of reasons, including strategic reasons, in particular; and e) discourses of weakness are eventually *temporal* and *spatial*, as they contain or draft time-structures (“everything was better in the old days”) or spatiality (“*Ex oriente lux?*”).

The five characteristics of the thematisation of deficiency mentioned above allow for very different modes of expression:¹⁹ they can not only report (the weak position of a business on the market, *etc.*) or estimate (the

16 Landwehr (2008), *Historische Diskursanalyse*, Sarasin (2003), *Geschichtswissenschaft und Diskursanalyse*.

17 Foucault (1981), *Archäologie des Wissens*, 74.

18 Here you can find productive overlaps to the 2017 granted CRC 1288 “Practices of Comparing”. Such practices cause various results so the question arises under which conditions a discourse of weakness emerges, which itself could change the practices of comparing.

19 Austin (2014 [1961]), *How to Do Things with Words*.

position of the business now and in five years, *etc.*), but also predict (the foreseeable trajectory of an entrepreneur if he or she does not change course, *etc.*) or scandalise (a business that is paying such high wages will not be able to compete, *etc.*). Every case points to the fact that discourses of weakness can also be a particular strategy of an actor, which introduces the question of when exactly actors participate in a discourse of weakness (and not in a discourse of strength, proven knowledge, deceit or violence), and what momentum and pitfalls accompany it.

Two fundamental dimensions of discourses of weakness can be analytically differentiated: they refer to (thematic) findings, on the one hand, and (social) relations, on the other. The Hansa has sometimes been portrayed as weak. This picture would, however, be incomplete without the tactical dimension of the discourse of weakness, meaning the intentions of the participants of the discourse. Thus, manipulative intentions in the use of discourses of weakness become of interest. Discourses of weakness were not and are not held to be “uninterested”, but mask completely different goals, such as the avoidance of legal liability (as was the case with the Hansa in the fifteenth century), or the encouragement of group cohesion (as with the debates about the demise of Europe). These brief examples clarify that public or respectively mass-media diffused materials need always to be confronted with the originators of the discourse of weakness in order to enable the identification of unformulated discourse strategies and hidden interests. This inseparable entanglement of the thematic and the social dimension needs to be re-constructed in every case of a discourse of weakness. Clearly, this analytically very neat distinction will be a lot more blurred in the concrete historical world: we know of discourses of weakness that cannot be understood as a reaction to an important event, but which are constitutive for a constellation, as in the history of Christianity, where discourses of weakness are always present in authoritative texts, while there is always a salvation-related discourse of strength as well. How exactly the thematic and social dimensions of weakness were completed empirically and are completed to this day, meaning how the manifestation of weakness in different constellations has configured and manifested itself, will be documented in the works of the current CRC 1095. Discourses of weakness are a multi-layered and—in a systematically way—until now disregarded phenomena: they often occur comparatively and bundle in a singular manner the action conditions and self-placements of actors in difficult circumstances and situations.

III. In Practice: Resources within Resource Regimes

Frequently, resources are subject to culmination in public debates: oil, education, or, as of late, data, are respectively made out to be crucial for the future development of societies. Accordingly, the contention about resources is drastically conceptualised as a “fight” or “escalation”.²⁰ In human and social sciences, however, resources have been the subject of research for a long time, as can be seen, for example, in the so-called Resource Mobilization Theory in the 1970s or in various projects in the history of science and in economic history about resources as an important factor in historical change.²¹ A prominent usage of resources is introduced by the social scientist Anthony Giddens in his theory of structuration.²² Structures—according to Giddens—consist of rules and resources, whereby the latter is the initial point of power. Giddens differentiated between allocative and authoritative resources, providing a distinction between the control over objects or goods in contrast to the control over people. However, within historical research, the problem of application emerges because the relevance of resources is accompanied by an abstract meaning of the concept. So, it is necessary to specify the different situations and ways in which resources shaped the conditions of action open to an actor. To avoid an overt fixation on individual resources, researchers have offered different attempts at contextualisation, including, for example, resource complexes, resource cultures,²³ and resource ensembles.²⁴ Resource regimes,²⁵ however, have rarely been used to date. What all these

20 Reder et al. (2012), *Kampf um Ressourcen*. See, recently, The Economist (2017), *The World's Most Valuable Resource*.

21 An early use of the concept of resources is Penrose (1959), *Growth of the Firm*. For a general overview: Klein (2010), *Ressourcenkonfigurationsmanagement*, 38 ff. Since the 1970s social sciences uses the so-called Resource Mobilization Theory, see: McCarthy et al. (1977), *Resource Mobilization* and also 25 years later as a stock taking: McCarthy et al. (2001), *Enduring Vitality of the Resource Mobilization Theory*. Historical science also picked up this: see Mittag et al. (2014), *Forschung über soziale Bewegungen*, 241 ff. In history of science, the concept of resource is well established: see Ash (2002), *Wissenschaft und Politik*, and recently, Flachowsky et al. (2017), *Ressourcenmobilisierung*. See, also, the instructive research on natural resources: Haller et al. (2014), *Rechnen mit der Natur*, 8–19.

22 Giddens (1984), *Constitution of Society*, 256 ff.

23 Hardenberg et al. (2017), *Resource Turn*, 15, 19.

24 Ash (2002), *Wissenschaft und Politik*.

25 The term resource regime has been used sporadically until now: see Young (1984), *Resource Regimes*, who understands regimes as institutions. Also in economics there is a sporadic usage: Liebscher (2013), *Betriebliche Ressourcensicherung*, 264 ff. For a vivid usage

attempts have in common is that they try to avoid a reductionism in the sense of taking a given resource out of the lifeworld and treating it as an isolated phenomenon. Research agrees that resources are to be understood (i) in relation to other resources, and (ii) in their socio-cultural embeddedness, in order to obtain new and accurate insights.²⁶ The high value of a framework is, however, too unspecific, and need concretisation. This is where the research interest of the CRC 1095 begins, by trying to register resources in their specific embedment. On the one hand, the focus is on the rules, practices and norms for the handling of resources, a complex which we define as a regime.²⁷ These resource regimes enable us not only to register the resources themselves, but also their handling in a wider sense. The set of rules and regulations which organises the handling of resources opens up a perspective that transforms the resources into a broader issue. An example from the CRC 1095 can illustrate this vividly: the usage of sacred objects as a military resource in the sixth century is not analysed with regard to their materiality, scarcity, value or religious origin. In contrast to this, questions of another sort emerge: Who was allowed to use the object? Who was responsible for the effects? Who, if anyone, was responsible for their absence? How did they explain the unpredictability of effects? Could every sacred object acquire military status or was there a kind of “testing” which determined a specific worth? How did they deal with the usage of these objects on the battlefield (in contrast to the earlier urban usage), and who managed their adaptation to new environments? A description of this concrete regime refers not to a history of single objects but also to a set of rules and regulations that shaped (but not completely determined) the handling of the resource in question. It also refers—and this is important—to a distinct discourse about the weakness of the military clout of the Romans. Only then does the emergence of new military opportunities become understandable. In the light of these thoughts, it will be generally proven whether using heavily resource-related characteristics such as scarcity, materiality, distribution and substitution is constructive, and what alternatives could be used.

in the history of Early Modern Age, see Hübner (2015), *Soziale Ungleichheit*, 150–162. Hübner uses the term regime to characterise common properties.

26 See, for example, research about water as an issue of knowledge, engineering, infrastructure and power, von Reden (2015), *Wasser*, 9–25.

27 We have a non-pejorative understanding of regimes: see, referring to political sciences, Krassner (1983), *Regime as Intervening Variables*.

It has become clear that, on their own, resource regimes are not sufficient to provide a fully-faceted description of resources. The high importance of the actors that act within regimes leads us to believe that we should broaden the perspective on resources by the aforementioned process of self-placement and positioning. Such discursive factors, vividly manifested in discourses of weakness, have a relevant impact on the handling of resources: thinking about the state of affairs, about requirements, or about the re-direction of an involvement creates criteria for the use of resources, and we are interested in the relationship between both spheres: one instructive example refers to mobilising effects of discourses of weakness on the use of resources, whereas a clear and indicative effect of such discourses seems to be a special case. Discourses, in general, can develop their own dynamic(s), and they can also be inconsistent and without any consequences. So an important aim of the CRC 1095 is to develop conceptual tools to analyse both resources and the impact of discursive elements such as weakness and strength. How exactly the terms “resource regime” and “discourses of weakness” unfold and show their application in actual research is the subject of this volume, which inaugurates the CRC 1095 book series. It is the result of the cross-epochal and interdisciplinary work of young scholars in the first research phase. Our colleagues pay a lot of attention to the CRC-concepts, on the one hand, and to their particular doctoral and post-doctoral research projects, on the other. Going into detail and being general at the same time was a big adventure for everyone, and one which mirrors the typical situation of a research cluster of different disciplines.

The article entitled “Weakness: Ranges of Disciplinary Approaches” by Kathrin Knodel and Anselm Spindler portrays the wide range of weakness attributions, from reflections about unchangeable human nature (philosophy) to the investigation of highly changeable social positions (ethnology). The article puts a spotlight on an important conceptual feature of the CRC 1095, namely, that weakness does not exist “*per se*”, but in the discursive mode of various attributions. How this mode was shaped is an open question from a historic and cultural sciences standpoint. What the actual attribution looked like, what motives were behind it, and what “topic” (the weakness of the state, the downfall of Europe, for example) it dealt with, are all questions that characterise the analysis of discourses of weakness.

The article entitled “Representation of Weakness: Functions, Images, Effects” by Klaus Seidl then shows the unfolding of discourses of weak-

ness: as an analytical concept, it contains a variety of structural aspects, which, for example, includes the connection between diagnosis and treatment. Diagnoses themselves contain many variations that need to be historically re-constructed. Besides these structural characteristics, representations of weakness need to be considered with a special focus on metaphors and images. Representations like this are not a mere effigy of a discourse of weakness, but have a performative character. Since the communicative exposure cannot be controlled by the actors, they are prone to develop their own dynamics, which can result in non-intended, but simultaneously potent, consequences.

Discourses of weakness are not bound to a certain form, but are highly polymorph. The article entitled “Visions of Decline in Transhistorical Perspective: Narratives, Images, Effects” by Nadine Eikelschulte, Philipp Höhn, Sebastian Riebold, Klaus Seidl, and David Weidgenannt demonstrates a comparatively illustrious kind of discourse of weakness. Decline is conceptualised as an analytical category that is based upon the existence of a change for the worse, which underlines a temporal dimension. The analysis of the origin of weakness and its future (negative) development is very telling because of two aspects: Decline is a category that historical actors resort to in order to comprehend and respond to challenges of their times and also to advance particular political agendas. Decline also informs us, and sometimes implicitly, about contemporary perceptions of inevitability or the accompanying possibilities of influence on an ongoing development.

Discourses of weakness occur at various levels and places in society and offer attractive opportunities for comparison. Two, at first sight, disparate phenomena are analysed in the article entitled “Counting Weakness? The Institutionalisation of Data Collection in the Nineteenth Century German Chemical Industry and Meteorology” by Linda Richter and Frederic Steinfeld. The problem of an uncertain future and being dependent on projections was a challenge to both enterprises (market success) and meteorologists (reputation). Both actors work this into discourses of weakness, thereby thematising their own situation. Despite different starting-points, both reacted to the weakness in, what is from today’s view, an obvious, but, from a past view, a novel way: the systematic collection of data that differentiated into an institutionalised form of information acquisition. Both the case studies inspire reflection on to what extent societies develop typical and recurring patterns of problematisation, and solutions that can be identified upon the basis of discourses of weakness.

The article entitled “Recourses: A Historical and Conceptual Roadmap” by Daniel Hausmann and Nicolas Perreaux delivers the first results on what has, to date, been a missing conceptual history of resources. Resources in today’s understanding are founded on semantic changes in the eighteenth century, from which the expansion of the term took its course. Especially in the second half of the twentieth century, economic patterns of interpretation caused an increase in the usage of the term “resource”, which is currently also used in social and cultural studies. The connection between conceptual and general history (particularly the relation between the term “resource” and the emergence of capitalism) offers attractive questions for future research at the CRC 1095.

The article entitled “Perspectives of a Resource History: Actions—Practices—Regimes” by Christian A. Müller asks what theoretical vocabulary can be used to describe the emergence of regimes. Here, the simple reference to means is not sufficient; instead, the registration of means in their “situatedness” is productive. The accompanying question is what action context is the base of a given means. It is proposed to embed means into actions, practices and regimes. Practices are an important indicator for the spread of means, while regimes signal their generalisation. Only under the circumstances of a regime should one talk about resources, because it indicates a rule-based and widespread phenomenon.

With empirical examples across various epochs, the motive of social embeddedness is demonstrated in the article entitled “Resources in a Social World” by Otto Danwerth, Theresa Dittmer, Seto Hardjana, Daniel Hausmann, Nicolas Perreaux, Linda Richter, Christian Scheidler, Frederic Steinfeld, and David Weidgenannt. Here, too, a perspective solely focused on resources is deemed insufficient. Rather, resources always point to regimes that distinguish themselves via processes of extraction, refining, circulation, transfer, as well as vanishing. Only the context of a regime creates the resources (and not simply the means). The formerly dominating economic understanding of resources is expanded with a socio-cultural view on resources.

The penultimate article entitled “Power and Resource Regimes: Processes in the Use of Resources Grounded on Norms and Practices” by Anna Dorofeeva and Alexander Krey, in collaboration with Nadine Eikelschulte, Lukas Jäger, Melina Kalfelis, Sebastian Riebold, Carla Thiel, and Marco Toste, presents another essential aspect of the CRC-approach: resources and their embedment in regimes cannot be understood without

the dimension of power. In social sciences, the conceptual relation between resources and power is already known, but it is difficult to implement this into concrete research. Accordingly, the article illustrates resource regimes as a rule-based context of dealing with resources that can be used as a framework for the analysis of processes of power.

The concluding article entitled “Agency and Asymmetries: Actors and their Access to Resources in Colonial and Developmental Setting” by David Rex Galindo, Melina Kalfelis, and José Luis Paz Nomey asks how research into the mobilisation of resources at the concrete level of actors can be realised. The, in theoretical debates, long discussed term of agency has proved to be a pertinent concept. The starting-points of the three case studies are seemingly asymmetrical situations: foreign aid in Africa or, for a historical view, colonial rule in Mexico and Peru in the early modern age. In all situations, a highly uneven distribution of opportunities to act is to be expected. But a view on the concrete level of action then shows regularly unnoticed dynamics: agency in African and colonial regimes opens up perspectives on phenomena of action that can only be understood at local level which cannot be satisfyingly recognised from a macro-perspective.

IV. In Future: Perspectives and Prospects

From the explanations given above, it should have become clear that discourses of weakness and resource regimes can become powerful tools of historical research, and that they can help us a great deal to approach questions which are broadly linked to the larger problem of historical change or transformation. While weakness may, at the first glance, seem to be a rather fuzzy concept which appears to have much less explanatory power than more rigid approaches, such as “vulnerability”,²⁸ we suggest that it is precisely the “relativeness” of the concept which makes the ascription of weakness to a historical formation so enlightening. Discourses of weakness constitute a “reflexive layer”, which, in many cases, underlies decisions and attempts to change or adapt resource regimes.

To put it in more abstract terms, discourses of weakness are of importance for historical actors since they are extremely useful in order to

28 Hilhorst et al. (2004), *Mapping Vulnerability*.