"Catch-Up Competitiveness" in Asia: On the recontextualisation of economic imaginaries

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Abstract

In 2003 the Asian Development Bank published another of its annual series, the *Asian Development Outlook*. This "outlook" is designed to give an overview of the performance and struggles of Asian economies and a forecast for its short-term future. Additionally, each year it covers a specific topic and delivers analyses and policy suggestions concerning the respective economic topic. The full title of this section was *Competitiveness in Developing Asia. Taking Advantage of Globalization, Technology, and Competition*. The most important reason why this paper can be regarded as significant is its distinctive conceptualisation of "catch-up competitiveness". What is so striking about this new term is that it merges two different yet equally disseminated and highly recognised (economic) discourses: "catch-up development" and "competitiveness". This paper critically explores the newly coined concept, tries to follow the distinctive roots it is made out of, and seeks to analyse the simplifications and mystifications on which it rests. I want to offer a different understanding of this particular developmental concept through de-mystification, de-naturalisation and *Ideologiekritik* (critique of [inherent/implicit] ideology) following an overall approach to discourse informed by Critical Discourse Analysis theorists.

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Introduction

In 2003 the Asian Development Bank published another of its annual series, the *Asian Development Outlook*. This "outlook" is designed to give an overview of the performance and struggles of Asian economies and a forecast for its short-term future. Additionally, each year it covers a specific topic and delivers analyses and policy suggestions concerning the respective economic topic. The full title of this section of the 2003 Asian Development Outlook (henceforth ADO) was *Competitiveness in Developing Asia. Taking Advantage of Globalization, Technology, and Competition*. There are many reasons why this paper by the Asian Development Bank (henceforth ADB) can be regarded as significant, reasons that I will elaborate below. The most important is its distinctive account of "competitiveness", "catch-up competitiveness", which is framed throughout the ADO. What is so striking about this new term is that it merges two different yet equally disseminated and highly recognised (economic) discourses: "catch-up development" and "competitiveness".

This paper critically explores the newly coined concept of catch-up competitiveness, tries to follow the distinctive roots it is made out of, and seeks to analyse the simplifications and mystifications on which it rests. I want to offer a different understanding of this particular developmental concept through de-mystification, de-naturalisation and *Ideologiekritik* (critique of [inherent/implicit] ideology) following an overall approach to discourse informed by Critical Discourse Analysis theorists. The underlying hypotheses of the paper can be summarised as such: (1) catch-up competitiveness is a recontextualised economic imaginary which is made out of two specific discourses with distinct semantic histories (catch-up & competitiveness); (2) this new imaginary is based on particular simplifications, mystifications, and vagueness. The first section of the paper will now reflect on the broader methodology and establish and explain the abstract terms of the hypotheses (and indeed of the whole paper).

Methodological Reflexions: Critical Discourse Analysis, Economic Imaginaries and Recontextualisation

The following presentation moves from abstract methodological considerations via the discussion of abstract-simple concepts to the issue of how these are to be understood in respect to the hypotheses stated above. Naturally this section cannot and, indeed, does not aim, to give either a complete and thorough discussion of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as such or a complete account of my own epistemological starting point. This would simply lead too far astray from the actual research focus. Instead it will eclectically touch on theoretical issues and concepts vital for and used in this particular analysis.

Critical Discourse Analysis and Semiosis

In recent years CDA has become an often-referred to methodology in countless studies from various disciplines. This is not surprising given the increased interest in, and attention drawn to 'discourse' in the wake of the cultural turn(s). But there is more to it: CDA is outspokenly transdisciplinary, problem-oriented, and has many different roots. It could be called an "open source" approach. CDA has never been a single, unified approach and (hopefully) never will be. Rather it can be seen as an umbrella approach with some shared concepts about the socially efficacious nature of discourse and the responsibility of critical social enquiry (Fairclough, 2007, 2009; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Wodak, 2006; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Obviously the two most central terms here are 'discourse' and 'critical'. But they are far from being easily conceptualized.

'Discourse' is defined in many ways both across and outside academia. It has become a fuzzy concept used by many and with variegated definitions. It could easily be argued that "discourse" has become a floating signifier. The same can be said even for analysts within CDA, with notions ranging from 'discourse as written and oral texts' to 'discourse as the meaning-making element of social process' (Wodak and Meyer, 2009; Fairclough, 2009). What can be said for CDA as a whole is its emphasis of context and its understanding of 'discourse' as a 'social practice'. No matter how 'discourse' is understood in detail it is always contextualized, thus refers to an extra-discursive world to which 'discourse' is dialectically related (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997): 'discourse' is 'socially *constitutive* as well as socially shaped' (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997: 258, original italics). Fairclough further distinguishes 'discourse' from 'genre' and 'style'. In this, discourse is the semiotic way of the representation and/or construal of social practices as well as of particular aspects of the material world; genre is the semiotic way of social (inter-) action; style is the semiotic way of 'being' or the semiotic aspect of identity (Fairclough et al., 2004; Fairclough, 2009). Semiosis is understood as the intersubjective production of meaning (Fairclough et al., 2004), i.e. meaning-making. The term comprises both linguistic and extra-linguistic systems, i.e. 'signs' in their broadest sense and construes meaning-making as a social (performative) process. Thus discourse in Fairclough's (and other's) understanding is part of semiosis and is therefore in its character always semiotic but it does not exhaust the latter. While discourse is understood as a specific representation of social or material aspects of the world, semiosis refers to the overall process of 'making sense' of the world. Additionally this 'making sense' or 'meaning-making' is not understood as an individualistic cognitive event but rather as a socially negotiated process, which is to say that 'meaning-making' is a social process.

This distinction proves to be fruitful in at least three respects. First, it defines 'discourse' more narrowly and at the same time retains a concept for broad semiotic processes. Second, it differentiates between several semiotic moments in the overall process of meaning-making (i.e.: discourse as construal of the material world, genre as modes of interacting, style as identity construction). Third, by doing so it offers a broader yet focused

approach to these differing semiotic aspects. Accordingly, expressions like 'discursive construction' or 'discursive aspects of' have a distinct meaning and are not used arbitrarily following an inflationary use of the term 'discourse'. This distinction draws heavily from the work of Norman Fairclough in the context of 'his' dialectical-relational approach (*inter alia* Fairclough, 2009). It is also presented in a conjoint work with Bob Jessop and Andrew Sayer which focuses on semiosis in critical realist terms (Fairclough et al., 2004). In his latest works Fairclough has distanced himself from the use of 'to represent' in favour of 'to construe' (Fairclough, 2009) because it seemingly emphasises the process of 'grasping' the world from one perspective. I would suggest to use both terms equally as 'to construe' does not refer directly to the constructed character of 'things' as it can be understood as a personal, subjective interpretation of the world. Thus the view on how construal is produced might be obstructed. Paradoxically, Sayer pointed to this in his distinction of critical and uncritical cultural turns, saying uncritical turns would only analyse 'construal' (Ray and Sayer, 1999). How this understanding of discourse (and semiosis) impacts and informs the analysis will become more apparent shortly below.

Imaginaries

Another distinction in respect to discourse and semiosis is the term 'imaginary'. If discourses are understood as *representations* of aspects of the world (e.g. 'the economy' or 'politics') imaginaries are construed as *explanations* which aim at management, governance, and/or forecasting of these aspects. The important difference is that discourses do not necessarily explain what is represented, Nor do discourses offer particular strategies of governance. Imaginaries on the other hand rely on a discursive representation to explain reality and offer specific management strategies for that (aspect of) reality. An imaginary is a closed knowledge system: it offers one particular discursive representation of a problem (e.g. 'the economy'), one explanation for it and a coherent set of strategies for solution. Both discourse and semiosis as mentioned above are concerned with representation and meaning-making respectively, but do not deal with what follows from it, i.e. specific strategies for agency. Following a dialectic-relational account of semiosis (Fairclough, 2009; Fairclough et al., 2004; Jessop, 2004), these imaginaries obviously are not completely arbitrary but correspond significantly, yet partially, with real material processes, i.e. 'the world'. Hence imaginaries must be reasonably adequate to be effective. Accordingly, they are discursively constituted and materially reproduced (Jessop, 2004). An economic imaginary for example, claims an objective understanding of the highly complex chaotic sum of all existing economic processes and offers coherent sets of activities based upon its understanding. The necessary narrowness of these imaginaries' accounts of the chaotic sum of unstructured economic activities limits in turn their efficacy of governance or management and even forecasting. Thus growing constraints and contradictions make stable economic imaginaries highly improbable. This points to the necessity of other related semiotic and extra-semiotic practices in order to respond flexibly and reflexively to

disruptions and crises, and secure a (more or less) smooth reproduction of social orders (Jessop, 2004). This means that the explanations and strategies put forward by imaginaries are socially negotiated and discursively articulated rather than arbitrary (strategic) interpretations of specific individuals.

To sum up the main differences between semiosis, discourse, and imaginary: the first is understood as the overall social meaning-making process or the *intersubjective production of meaning*; the second is understood in terms of representations of aspects of reality and is only one part of semiosis (others include styles and genres); the third establishes meaning through explanation and offers specific strategies for agency coherent with its own discursive representations. If a particular imaginary becomes *hegemonic* or widely accepted as a (or rather: the) legitimate and 'common sense' explanation it is the (intermediate) product of semiosis.

The critical impetus of CDA derives from different sources such as the Frankfurt School, Jürgen Habermas and Critical Theory, literary criticism, Marxist tradition(s), and so forth. They all share an understanding of critique as making visible the 'interconnectedness of things' (Fairclough, 1995). This visibility and critical knowledge of the social world aims at a self-reflexion of human beings, enabling them to emancipate from whatever form of domination (Wodak, 2006; Wodak and Meyer, 2009). Thus CDA has an outspoken emancipatory agenda. Semiosis can comprise 'mystification' or naturalisation of social processes thus undermining any criticism, e.g. the construction of neo-liberal globalization as a 'natural step' in human progress or as an inevitable reaction to economic growth. These mechanisms have to be addressed to meet an emancipatory research agenda. It is only through 'demystification' or 'denaturalization' of semiosis, i.e. showing its constructed character, that the contingency of social and material objects, structures, and processes can be fully depicted.

Recontextualisation

A process of meaning making includes the recontextualisation of discourses, i.e. a change of their ('original') context(s). Sites of recontextualisation are manifold and can include a spatial change, Such as from one region or country to another, a shift in scale, as well as a transfer from one social field to another. In the course of this process the discourse has to be 'translated', re-negotiated, re-articulated, and so forth in order to 'fit' in the new context. This has ambivalent aspects though: on the one hand the new discourse is being appropriated in its new context; on the other hand it is a colonisation of a context by an 'external' discourse (cf. Fairclough, 2009: 165). Thus it is not surprising that these recontextualisations are highly contested as these new, external discourses can be incorporated into certain strategies pursued by specific social agents (both groups and individual) (Fairclough, 2009: 165). If recontextualisations are always also struggles for a concrete hegemonic (re-)articulation of a given discourse, then close attention must be drawn to both the agents around a given discourse as well as the genre and argumentational

rationality of their 'discursive output'. One particularly important instance in this process of hegemonic struggle is the linking of several discourses to form a 'discursive chain' (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough, 2009). If two or more discourses are 'used' to legitimate the respective other in its inherent logic(s) or narrativity then these discourses form a chain and become mutually reinforcing. This does not describe a mere addition of discourses. These chains lead to changing relations between discourses and/or different articulations of discourses (Fairclough, 2005; Jessop, 2004). A broad discursive chain does not necessarily have to become hegemonic but a hegemonic discourse (or imaginary) needs a broad network of discursive chains to be stabilized across sites and scales.

Reviewing the above stated hypotheses now with more elaborated abstract terms, it should be possible to (a) get a clearer understanding of the hypotheses and (b) define a way to work with them:

(1) *'Catch-up competitiveness' is a recontextualised economic imaginary which is made out of two particular discourses with distinct semantic histories ('catch-up' & 'competitiveness').* The aim will be to analyse how the text by the Asian Development Bank establishes 'catch-up competitiveness' as an explanatory category and offers concrete policy advice based upon its understanding. Thus the aim is to show that it is indeed an economic imaginary as defined above and is based on the particular text. Additionally, it is important to trace the 'discursive roots' of the new imaginary through making visible the discursive (and also quite material) chains this imaginary draws from. This can be achieved by reviewing other sources that deploy the same terms and follow up the references the Asian Development Bank text makes itself.

(2) *This new imaginary is based on particular simplifications, mystifications, and vagueness.* Every form of representation makes use of some form of 'discursive simplification' (Jessop, 2002) in order to narrate the complex and chaotic reality in a more or less coherent way. Imaginaries are therefore based on these simplifications as is every other form of semiosis. Simplification is (just like the overall semiosis) not an individualistic cognitive event but a socially negotiated process. The question therefore is how is something simplified? What is left out of the picture? What becomes the centre of attention? These simplifications are closely connected to myths. Myths are understood as implicit, underlying assumptions, or 'what goes without saying'. Certain arguments are taken for granted and removed from critique and discussion because they are made only implicitly. Thus myths help to make abbreviated, simplified explanations. Here the question is what is implicit and how does this affect the overall argument? As mentioned earlier, an emancipatory research agenda has to de-mystify these naturalised explanations in order to show the contingency and constructed character of social and material objects, structures, and processes. In my analysis I seek to deconstruct some of the simplifications and particularly one underlying myth in the text: a crude modernist understanding of development. This is done by careful reading of the text and offering both an external and text-immanent critique and *Ideologiekritik*.

The Asian Development Bank in context

If processes of recontextualisation are indeed contested re-articulations of discourses or imaginaries shaped by various covert (and overt) interests, and if the Asian Development Outlook of 2003 (ADO) by the Asian Development Bank is one instance of such a process, then closer attention must be drawn to both the Agent as well as the genre and argumentational rationality of the text. It is thus a question of the contextual setting.

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) as a regional equivalent of the World Bank gives away loans and offers technical support. But most importantly it is what could be called a *knowledge bank* (Plehwe, 2007), with connections to various other actors and think tanks, and single academics such as Sanjaya Lall (ADB, 2003; Lall, 1998). Its position as both a think tank and a lender makes the ADB a nodal point of discursive and material practices, as its discursive outputs, for example, may well influence its lending policy. This leads to particular (developmental) projects being financed and realised while others are not. The materiality of semiosis can hence be understood quite literally here: some things get built because of a specific understanding (or meaning) of the world. A recontextualised concept of competitiveness put forward by the ADB is thus highly significant for a vast amount of actual development agencies and processes in the whole region of Asia. The amount of countries reached by and included in the analyses of the ADB is significant. It includes countries in all of Asia, from Kazakhstan to Micronesia, from Mongolia to Papua New Guinea. As mentioned in the introduction, the annually published Asian Development Outlook (ADO) offers country-specific overviews of economic performance and forecasts for the coming year. Additionally it covers different topics each year which offer analyses of the overall economic development of the region and gives policy advice and strategies for decision makers from various fields (government officials, NGOs, advisors, and so forth).

Policy papers as a genre are always vague when it comes to clear strategies how certain goals could or should be achieved. Likewise, policy papers refer to concepts and terms they seldom define clearly. Both these 'vaguenesses' are important for this particular genre. Policy papers are never directed at one specific audience and in the given case its potential audience even stretches over more than one continent and governments representing more than one third of the world's population. As Norman Fairclough has pointed out in his analysis of EU policy papers on poverty and its recontextualisation in Romania, the original paper must be vague (or "open") enough to be recontextualised in the 27 EU-countries (Fairclough, 2007). Thus very different actual accounts of 'poverty' can be found in the EU, all referring to the same policy paper. One of the main aims of a policy paper is the weaving together of discursive threads offering new terms and concepts to be adopted and appropriated (hence recontextualised once more) on a regional or national level. This understanding of the genre is vital in order to fully grasp its structuration.

On Competitiveness

The ADO makes clear references to "competitiveness" as a pre-existing discourse right in its first paragraph, which is also designed as a third-level headline:

> 'During the last decade, competitiveness has been brought into the discussion of the search for the panacea for growth almost as if it represented a pillar of economic development, similar to trade and openness or savings. However, competitiveness is not a panacea for development for Asia's developing countries' (ADB, 2003: 205).

While the first section of this quote clearly establishes competitiveness as an important and influential discourse, the last sentence also lays the basis for its appropriation for an Asian context. At this point it seems advisable to examine this discourse on competitiveness in more detail. Competitiveness has long been an important aspect of economic discourses and theories, however with changing notions of *what* it actually is or how it can be achieved (or even *why* it should be achieved in the first place). For the sake of brevity, I cannot give an account of the varying economic discourses and imaginaries concerned with competitiveness throughout the decades and indeed centuries (Jessop, 2002: 119f; 2008; Lodge & Vogel, 1987; Reinert, 1994). Instead I want to focus on more recent developments which can be said to have been sparked by political-economic changes in the early 1980s. This might also roughly be the timeline the ADO refers to in the quote above. During this time the USA (and the UK) were confronted with low growth and high inflation while the highly successful export-oriented economies in Japan and East Asia (at this time mostly South Korea and Taiwan) gained strength (Krugman, 1994). The Reagan Administration set up the '*Commission on Industrial Competitiveness*' (1983) and the '*Council on Competitiveness*' (1988) respectively to place national competitiveness at the 'centre of national policy discourses and public consciousness' (Sum, 2009). Since then the rise of competitiveness as a major policy paradigm was accompanied and indeed informed and underpinned by newly emerging economic discourses and business studies on competition, which in turn also produced new management and consultancy knowledge. Gradually 'competitiveness' became a prime concern (and target) of transnational organisations, nation-states, regions, cities, and so forth.

This is reflected by a variety of Institutions and respective publications on competitiveness on various scales: the World Economic Forum and the Institute for Management Development both publish global competitiveness rankings ('Global Competitiveness Index' by the former, 'World Competitiveness Scoreboard' by the latter); the Competitiveness Institute is a knowledge databank and a networking website for different actors on a global level; the EU's 'Lisbon Strategy for Competitiveness' of 2000; the Asia Competitiveness Institute in Singapore is a similar knowledge agent claiming to cover

the whole Southeast-Asian (or ASEAN) region; the OECD's International Conference on City Competitiveness in 2005; et cetera. It becomes clear that the Asian Development Outlook (ADO) of 2003 by the Asian Development Bank is but one specific instance embedded in a wider discourse which is to be found on scales and sites which are manifold and variegated.

Competitiveness in the Asian Development Outlook

The specific understanding of competitiveness in the ADO can be defined through what Bob Jessop called the Schumpeterian Competition State (2002). Such a state 'prioritizes the pursuit of strategies intended to create, restructure or reinforce [...] the competitive advantages of its territory, population, built environment, social institutions and economic agents' (Jessop, 2002: 96). The most important aspect in this Schumpetarian understanding of competition is the construction of a *knowledge-based economy* or an economy based on innovative knowledge-workers. According to Schumpeter, competitiveness mostly depends on building preconditions for engaging in 'permanent innovation' by both individual and collective actors (i.e. workers and firms). Thus Jessop notes: 'Schumpeterian competitiveness depends on dynamic efficiency in allocating resources to promote *innovations* that will alter the pace and direction of economic growth and enable the economy to compete more effectively' (Jessop, 2002: 122, original italics). The ADO not only directly refers to Schumpeter's idea of 'creative destruction' through constant innovation directly in its second chapter (ADB, 2003: 208), it early on establishes knowledge as 'society's most important resource' (Jessop, 2002: 207) and indeed technological innovation as one of three 'drivers for change' (Jessop, 2002: 205). It is worth noting the vagueness in this construction of 'drivers for change'. A triad of points or terms can be a powerful rhetorical strategy to weave together different arguments or reinforce a statement. In the ADO there are two important triads put forth which are also being linked to each other. Hence I would call them an argumentational 'double triad'. The ADO states on its first page on competitiveness:

> 'During the last decade, there has been considerable interest indentifying the factors that can improve competitiveness, which is thought by many to be an important piece of the growth and development puzzle, perhaps the latest elixir in the quest for growth. Behind this quest is a complex interaction among a number of factors – or the "drivers of change" – which are globalization, technology, and competition.' (ADB, 2003: 205)

The first striking feature is that in this quote and throughout the text, 'growth' is being used interchangeably with 'development', while the notion of 'drivers of change' describes again growth and/or development. Thus growth equals development equals change. And there are three drivers to bring about this growth-development-change-triad, namely

globalization, technology, and competition. Terms such as 'development' or 'globalization' are highly contested when it comes to defining *what* these terms actually mean and what complex processes these (can or cannot) describe. Yet here they are just being put forward without further discussion or definition. Hence what form growth-development-change can take is fully up to the pre-existing construal of the audience. The same can be said for 'globalization'. 'Technology' in this respect must be understood as 'technological innovation' (ADB, 2003: 208) and is hence based on a Schumpeterian understanding of competitiveness. The strong emphasis which is placed on innovation (and as a consequence education) is further fortified through special boxes in the text structure that offer so-called success stories such as 'The information and communications technology industry in India' (ADB, 2003: 210), or 'Outsourcing and White-collar globalization: a boon to Asia's developing countries' (ADB, 2003: 212). The text also clearly offers threats such as a box titled 'low skills, vicious circles, and traps' (ADB, 2003: 251) or quite strong formulations as 'forcing firms to be creative' (ADB, 2003: 208).

All of this has of course also repercussion on the way labour is perceived: 'the modern workplace requires employees who are inherently "trainable" and can learn rapidly' (ADB, 2003: 255). Jessop points to similar developments in connection to a Schumpeterian notion of competitiveness and the state: 'States also promote the commoditization of knowledge and the integration of knowledge and intellectual labour into production. This is reflected in the increased emphasis on the training of knowledge workers and lifelong learning' (Jessop, 2002: 131), and the emphasis put on educational reform justified and legitimised in terms of competitiveness (cf. Fairclough and Wodak, 2008: 113; Jessop, 2008). Thus it is also not surprising that several strategies of the ADO to enhance innovation include state policies related to education and deregulation of curricula to be more job-oriented (cf. ADB, 2003: 255). The need for market-friendly and job-oriented educational institutions is established through the overall economic imaginary, the concrete strategies remain as vague as typical for policy papers: 'In many countries, this will require some deregulation and decentralization of curriculum policy' (ADB, 2003: 255).

"Catch-up", Developmentalism and Catch-up Competitiveness

As mentioned in the introduction, the ADO presents its own account of competitiveness, namely 'catch-up competitiveness'. A short overview of the discourse on the latter term has already been presented. I now turn to a discussion of 'catch-up' discourses and finally to the newly coined concept itself. It would go far beyond the limits of this paper to present an in-depth semantic history of the term 'catch-up' in the Asian context, yet some aspects have to be mentioned. 'Catch-up' is an inherently developmental term as it can only be understood in terms of catching up with 'the West', 'the global North', or 'the developed World'. But more important is its specific regional context. The first country to develop a 'catch-up'

strategy in Asia was Japan as early as the late 19th century in the Meiji era (Suehiro 2008). But it fully developed in the late 1970s and gained recognition especially in East Asia. The main feature of catch-up developmentalism in political-economic terms is its understanding of development as a government-led process which involves central planning and strong involvement by technocrats (often educated abroad), an intimate relation between governments and big business, regulations on trade, export-oriented industrialisation, and adoption of 'western' technology and know-how to boost technological development and innovation 'at home' (Jessop & Sum, 2006: 152ff; Suehiro 2008).

In the (East-)Asian context, a strong state and the predominant understanding of 'development by all means' led to terms such as 'developmental regime' in Neo-Weberian accounts of the Asian growth (Amsden, 1989; 2001; Chang, 2006; Wade, 1990); 'developmental dictatorship' (Suehiro 2008); 'technological capabilities' (Lall, 1988); or 'exportism' in regulation approach literature (Jessop & Sum 2006) respectively. This regime was based on a specific understanding or imaginary not only of what 'development' actually is but, as some more critical scholars have pointed out, that development is a goal to be achieved in the first place (Tucker, 1999). The economic success of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan in the 1970s and 1980s, which all followed a catch-up strategy of development, led to a dissemination of its discourse as it was adopted by other countries of the region trying to imitate their more successful neighbours. It is hard to imagine a discourse on the 'Asian Miracle' and the 'Asian Tigers' of the 1990s without the underlying notion of 'catch-up' (Suehiro 2008, Jessop & Sum, 2006: 161). Export-oriented catch-up strategies became a strong and legitimate model for development in East Asia, which contested the liberal idea represented by international actors such as the World Bank or the IMF, who sought to limit the state's interference (Burkett & Hart-Landsberg, 2003). The ongoing economic struggles of the Japanese economy during the 1990s and the 1997 Asian Crisis led to a general decline of this legitimacy of the catch-up discourse, and indeed one of the prime objectives by the IMF, who stepped in after the crisis, was to break the influence of the state (cf. Pasuk & Baker 2002). The Asian Development Outlook reinforces this discourse again with statements such as:

> 'To *catch-up*, rather than merely keep up with (at a certain distance behind) the leaders, this combined capability must be sufficient to *assimilate and improve on technologies* created in the leading nations over sustained periods of time. The absorption of foreign technology is essential to create *internationally tradable* products that are *competitive* in terms of cost and quality' (ADB, 2003: 257, my italics).

Here the notion of exportist 'catch-up' is clearly being tied to an understanding of Schumpeterian 'competitiveness through technological innovation' (cf. italics). This brings together the two discursive threads elaborated above. In the ADO this has a semantic bearing: the former term has a specific Asian background but was in decline; the latter

derives from a 'western' context, hugely successful and on its way towards a 'hegemonic knowledge brand' (Sum, 2009). The merging of these terms is mutually reinforcing and underpins competitiveness in this new Asian context. In the next section closer attention will be given to catch-up competitiveness understood as an economic imaginary. Following the given definition of this concept the focus will be on the offered explanations, strategies and advice of this particular imaginary.

The Asian Development Bank outlines clearly what catch-up competitiveness is: 'behind-the-frontier innovation' which depends on 'entrepreneurship and educational provision, as well as market-friendly institutions and sound macro-economic management' (ADB, 2003: 257). It is important to note how this imaginary also *explains* the economic reality. The most important aspect to be explained in this context is the economic success of certain countries of the region, such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, or Singapore. The development and economic success of these countries is constructed in a stage model which leads from manufacture and assembly to the research and development of electronics which are regarded as a 'leading industrial sector for promoting high-technology industrial development' (ADB, 2003: 258). This model is visualised in the Southeast Asian case and again puts Singapore forward a kind of 'success story':

Table 3.16 Technological Stages in Southeast Asia's Electronics Industry

Decade	Singapore	Malaysia	Thailand	Indonesia	Viet Nam
1960s	Assembly				
1970s	Process Engineering	Assembly	Assembly		
1980s	Product Development	Process Engineering	Assembly	Assembly	Assembly
1990s	Research & Development	Product Development	Process Engineering	Process Engineering	Assembly

Source: Hobday (2002).

Table 1 (Retrieved from ADB, 2003: 259)

The table suggests that Singapore developed a new economic strategy every decade with Malaysia, its geographical neighbour, following the same path with a ten-year delay, and so forth. The reason why Singapore can be regarded as the success story or 'blue print' here (apart from its obvious economic success) is the emphasis that is put to innovation, a category for success well established in the text. The simple explanation seems to be: international competitiveness through innovation leads to development ('catch-up') as proven by some countries of the region. The policy advice which follows from this representation of economic realities is again inherently vague and is little more than the call for educational reform, appropriate infrastructure, and market-friendly legislation to open up the national market to international trade, etc. (cf. ADB 2003: 257ff), i.e. to foster innovation in order to catch-up and gain international competitiveness.

Underlying Developmental Myth and Neo-Modernist Simplifications

As mentioned in the introduction, there is an underlying myth in this text, something that 'goes without saying'. Such a myth means that the ultimate base of an argument is removed from scrutiny as it is neither argued for nor against – it is implicitly stated as a fact. Given the overall structure of the text by the ADB I would argue for the existence of a 'developmental myth'. It is an implicit presupposition that economic development (or 'catch-up' in this respect) is something which has to be achieved. The text never argues *why* it is important for Asian countries to economically 'catch-up'. Vincent Tucker argues rightly that the 'myth of development' necessarily has to be a powerful one because the massive and fundamental changes a population has to live through in such a process can only be legitimised by a potent hegemonic imaginary. The societies of the respective countries can thus be mobilised and carry the weight 'development' can have (Tucker, 1999).

A very important part of the 'developmental myth' is its (neo-)modernist notion of a journey towards a clearly defined goal (which is general 'development') along a pre-given path (the path and history of the 'West', the 'global North', or the 'developed world'). Therefore it is not surprising that metaphors that play with notions of 'journey', 'frontier', or 'race' can be found throughout the text, e.g. 'Failure to compete in these markets usually means falling behind in the technological race' (ADB, 2003: 257). Table 1 above also shows an interesting visualisation of this modernist understanding of 'development-in-stages'. The power of this table lies in its visualisation of development and its simplification of this process. It seems as if the success of Singapore can easily be repeated. The 'success story' of Singapore is closely related to another rhetoric based on a modernist notion of development, namely the analogy to the history of 'more developed countries':

> 'Today's combination of the new industrial revolution and globalization is similar to that of the late nineteenth century when, for example, the United States (US) emerged as a major economic power; or earlier when the United Kingdom emerged as a colonial and manufacturing power. It can also be compared with the 1960s and 1970s, when Japan emerged as a leading industrial power, and the 1980s, which saw the fast development of the Republic of Korea (Korea)' (ADB, 2003: 206).

There are several problems with this modernist understanding of development. The main point of critique is its neglect of (global) structural disadvantages. The quote above for example implies that every country can become just like the USA or the UK by applying certain policies. Whether history repeats itself or not can be left to philosophy, but that one country cannot repeat the history of another country seems out of question. Yet the difficulties global power structures mean to a country at the global periphery are rendered invisible. Instead the development process becomes reduced and simplified to be

'technological-determinist in the most vulgar sense' (Burkett & Hart-Landsberg, 2003: 156). Through an articulation of competitiveness in these terms disadvantages are blurred and the image emerges that every country is equally capable of competing and innovating on a global scale.

This technological-determinist understanding *inter alia* produces the evaluation of human development solely in terms of its contribution to the overall catch-up process. In the ADO and its policy advice this is reflected in the strong emphasis which is put on educational reform. These reforms are not argued for in terms of general human development or under a humanist belief but only in terms of producing valuable human resources, employability, and economic utility (cf. Chapter on 'Education and Skills' in the ADO; ADB, 2003: 246ff). As mentioned above, this of course means a restructuration of the educational sector and the change of curricula along the lines of economic logics and arguments. The inherent, basic simplification here is misleading. The strategy for developing countries (in Asia) seems to be that 'proper' education and the production of employees who are 'inherently "trainable" and can learn rapidly' (ADB, 2003: 255) (and other policy strategies) will increase firms' innovation, which will enhance their competitiveness, which will ultimately lead to development. The problem is that the Asian Development Bank presupposes a 'new [international] division of labour' (ADB, 2003: 208) which offers equal opportunities for the 'participating' countries. This construal of the international division of (knowledge-) labour ignores certain power relation which shift the value produced in the production cycle to particular centres. As with every division of labour the question here is where does the value added chain end and who profits from this. Bob Jessop notes:

> 'This tension generates systematic asymmetries of interest within the information economy depending on the actors' differing position in the production, circulation and consumption of knowledge. The IPR regime [*note: Intellectual Property Rights*] is currently of overwhelming benefit, of course, to the US economy' (Jessop, 2002: 111).

While knowledge-workers (in Asia) might add value to this 'knowledge value chain', real profit is made elsewhere. This also follows from an understanding of development in catch-up theories as a purely national process (Burkett & Hart-Landsberg, 2003) and the ignorance of international power relations.

Lastly it is important to stress that these 'blind spots', or what is ignored and/or what goes without saying, are part of the discursive simplification inherent to economic imaginaries as discussed at the beginning of this paper. These shortcomings (e.g. the ignorance of country-specific modes of development; ignorance of global power structures; ignorance of unequal division of labour; ignorance of labour issues and human development, etc.) are vital in order to make the economic imaginary inherently stable and enable it to reproduce its specific understanding of 'the economy', thus to produce a certain meaning. The brief critique presented here can point to the fact that some issues are much

more complex or flag up issues which have been left out all together. This should show that structures and processes of 'the real existing economie(s)' are far more chaotic and complex to represent it the way the Asian Development Bank does. 'Catch-up competitiveness' and the advice derived thereof only makes sense (i.e. have *meaning*) if these and other (pressing) issues are ignored or overly simplified. Yet it is important to notice *what* is left out or over-simplified. Here it is mainly human development, global power relations and structural exploitation which are largely ignored, naturalised and/or mystified.

Conclusion

It was the overall aim of this paper to explore the concept of economic imaginaries and its recontextualisation both in abstract terms and in one concrete instance. It was argued that imaginaries are specific systems in which representations of the world (i.e. discourses) are linked to particular explanations and a coherent set of strategies for governance, management and forecasting. This process is not possible without discursive simplifications of the complex realities of the world. It is also not a single cognitive event of atomistic individuals but rather a social (i.e. intersubjective) process of negotiation, articulation, and overall meaning-making. In economic terms, such an imaginary simplifies the chaotic sum of economic processes and structures to produce a single coherent explanation and offer appropriate management strategies.

It was the prime working hypothesis of this paper that the text on 'catch-up competitiveness' by the Asian Development Bank can be regarded as one point in the recontextualisation of different discourses to produce a distinctively Asian developmental economic imaginary. 'Catch-up competitiveness' was shown to be such an imaginary as it offers an explanation for the economic success of some of the countries in the region in the last decades and concludes with several strategies and policy advice for the near future. As typical for the genre of policy papers which aim at a broad international audience, these strategies remain on a rather vague level and only offer terms, concepts and legitimising arguments for further recontextualisations (and indeed actions) on ever smaller spatial levels (regional, national, local), yet under the established inherent logic of the economic imaginary. The analysis tried to show some of the concrete and at points obvious discursive simplifications in the argument of the text and assumed a specific underlying assumption of development in neo-modernist terms. The neo-modernist understanding means that processes of development are constructed as following an almost pre-given path with guiding principles derived from observation of other countries' history. This construction however ignores country-specific modes of development and assumes that countries can somehow repeat the historical experience of more 'developed' countries. It was argued that this assumption ignores global power relations, structures of exploitation and the unequal international division of labour.

As an analytical category 'imaginary' proved to be a fruitful contribution to the more specific term 'discourse' and the overall term 'semiosis'. Especially the emphasis put on strategies and advice for agency can serve as an important addition to a critical discourse analysis. A careful analysis cannot ignore the actual 'outcome' of texts in form of policy advice or strategies. In particular it cannot ignore the simplifications and mystifications this advice is based on. Strategies and advice developed in texts are so important because ultimately they are on the (discursive) threshold to agency. As was shown in the case of the Asian Development Bank, a particular construal informs and shapes actually existing development projects and hence has a proper material impact. An analysis has to critically point out such processes of simplification (text-immanent critique) and offer a critique of what these simplified strategies leave out and possibly why (*Ideologiekritik*).

But this is just the starting point for a broader research project. Further research has to show how such an imaginary actually *does* something (i.e. how it informs other discourses on other scales, country-specific legislation, development plans and strategies deployed by particular agencies, etc.).

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