

Post-Colonial Dialogue or His Masters Voice?: translating the periphery in 'Global Social Policy' studies

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“For all of our languages, we can’t communicate” *Christy Moore*

“The master’s tools will never demolish the master’s house” *Audre Lorde*

An emerging literature on Global Social Policy, in its response to the meta-discourse of ‘globalisation’, has yielded valuable and insightful studies, but has tended to lack a critical, transdisciplinary, perspective capable of moving, both theoretically and empirically, beyond the boundaries of traditional ‘social policy studies’. The concept of social policy, used ahistorically “to represent state actions in both developed and developing societies, regardless of their different histories and different social conditions” (Baltonado, 1999 p14), appears even more fragile in the context of intensified transnational processes. A universalistic language of global social policy reflects the political and cultural monocentrism of ‘the Global North’ (Ashcroft et al, 2002), reproducing hegemonic divisions between ‘the West’ and ‘the rest’ (Midgley, 2004).

This paper seeks to bring a postcolonial theoretical perspective not only ‘back to Europe’, but also into ‘Global Social Policy’ studies. In interrogating processes of transnationalisation of ‘development’ and ‘welfare’ in South East Europe, a postcolonial critique of ‘modernisation’ questions a ‘universal’ epistemology and normative frame, replacing orthodox notions of ‘policy transfer’ with the concept of ‘policy as translation’, emphasising patterns, orchestrations, displacements and resistances in specific contexts, as the ‘big ideas’ of welfare and development seek to construct imaginary ‘others’. The process of ‘othering’ or the construction of objects denied voice and agency is however, radically incomplete in the ‘contact zones’ of postcolonial encounters. A focus on international organisations (including the World Bank, the European Union and the UN agencies) in a crowded policy space reveals diverse genres, styles, and technologies of power, indicating the fluid, hybrid, and multi-scalar nature of their practices.

Through a reflexive ethnography of welfare, the paper traces empirically, in Romania and Croatia, elements of transnational policy translation which have been under-emphasised in the extant literature including:

- the negotiation of competing knowledge claims between different actors in a crowded policy space;
- the increasing significance of intermediaries or boundary spanners in the process of transforming knowledge claims into sets of workable social practices;
- the processes through which existing (social) policy domains are deconstructed and reconstructed in ways which render them amenable to transnational abstract, mobile and dynamic regulatory fields, thereby defining new material, disciplinary and discursive relationships; and

- the traces of practices of resistance and rebellion capable of subverting these regulatory fields.

Our findings suggest that capturing key fragments of the transformation of social policy practices in South East Europe, allows for a reframing of these processes as a kind of postcolonial dialogue. An approach which emphasises issues of translation and translators offers insight into who translates what and how; maps technologies of power; and highlights sites, actors and processes neglected in mainstream Global Social Policy studies.

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