Social policy and social work

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State of art

Social policy and social work are too often conceived as 'junior' or 'applied' disciplines, in which concepts from the social sciences, and beyond, are best left to others and arrive late, if at all, and invariably in a simplified or distorted form (Clarke, 2004). Many of the most important 'turns' in social science in recent years have been ignored by, dismissed or trivialised by social policy and social work researchers and scholars. Social policy and social work education have, in many places, become technicised and depoliticised, in part as a result of their origins in training new cadres for emerging welfare states in parts of the (over-)developed world and the transfer of such a narrow framework to other parts of the world. In the context of crisis, and in the context of new forms of economistic logics and austerity polices within and beyond the European Union, there is a need both to repoliticise social policy and social work practices, and to revitalise their study through the introduction of a radically different, and differently radical, conceptual and analytical repertoire.

In this year's Dubrovnik IUC course, we want to explore these issues through understanding the 'social' in transnational and global terms, including the impact of austerity neo-liberalisms within the EU, in the constructed semi-periphery of South East Europe and, linked to participants' knowledge and experiences, in other parts of the world. The starting point is a rejection of the idea that there is a universal, relatively unchanging field or domain called 'social policy' or 'social work', as if those practices which were developed in Northern and Western welfare states after the Second World War have a universal, or global, resonance and relevance. We also want to open space for discussion, in the context of climate change, global warming and struggles for ecological sustainability on a planet with finite resources, of the importance of connecting social and ecological policies and practices (Dominelli, 2012).

The course will encourage participants to reflect on the social as addressed by writers such as Foucault (Rabinow, 1991, Gibson-Graham, 2006 and de Sousa Santos, 2001), making connections with forms of knowledge, power, and politics, with hegemonic disciplinarity, rather more than as a bundle of administrative mechanisms and instruments such as income support, social services, housing, and so on. Nancy Fraser's concern with a politics of recognition, representation and redistribution (Fraser, 1997) will form the basis of the connections between social policy, social work and social movements within the course.

The course will promote understandings of the hegemonic forces working in particular conjunctures, in specific spatial-temporal moments, in order to understand the pressures impacting on social policy and social work and, above all, in order to conceive of the space for radical oppositional possibilities. Stuart Hall's (Clarke, 2014; Hall, 2011) understanding of the profound social, political and cultural 'work' needed to sustain any hegemonic project is of immense importance here. Hall insists that we address conjunctures, spatial-temporal moments, not as unitary or singular but as composed of diverse, often even contradictory, elements. The Brazilian political scientist Evelina Dagnino (2007) has termed these 'perverse confluences'. Following Raymond Williams (1977), Hall insists that we address not only dominant trends, forces, discourses and practices but also those which are 'residual' or

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'emergent', so that there are always other possibilities at stake. Hall reminds us that it is the condensation of forces during a period of crisis, and the new social configurations that result, which mark out a new conjuncture.

Contradictions and challenges

The economic and financial crisis has had massive social impacts in terms of the creation of zones of exclusion, and new divisions, within the European Union itself, marked by massively high levels of unemployment, including the unemployment of young people, and large-scale out migration from peripheral parts of the EU and even from peripheral parts of core EU countries. Social workers are left with fewer and fewer resources to respond to a deepening social crisis. At the same time, a dominant discourse on debt and austerity reproduces a 'moral underclass discourse' (Levitas, 1999) in which not only the poor and excluded but, sometimes, whole countries such as Greece, are constructed as lazy and unworthy of investing in. Of course, regional blocs such as the European Union need to be approached in a non-essentialist way, as ambiguous, multiple, contradictory and changing entities, albeit undergoing radical restructuring in crisis. The crisis has certainly reanimated and variegated the transnational space, resulting in a kind of European translation of the neo-liberal Washington consensus. The overarching focus on debt and its reduction in a new international division of labour between the 'troika', now renamed 'the institutions', of course, has created, in the current conjuncture, not merely an economistic EU but a 'fiscal' and 'austerity' disciplinary EU. Again, it is both increasingly hard, but also increasingly necessary, to develop social policy and social work responses to challenge this.

   A key challenge is how to connect ecological and social issues so that any discussion of environmental challenges also addresses issues of structural inequalities, poverty and social exclusion, and oppression and powerlessness. This is made more difficult by the recalibration of regulation which has occured, as EU disciplinarity scrutinises Member states in terms of their monetary, fiscal and welfare policies, the 'modernisation' of which most often entail cutbacks and 'responsibilising' conditionalities. Macro-economic adjustment programmes represent the new 'social policy elsewheres' of the European Union, reinforced through the Annual Growth Survey, the Joint Assessment Framework, Staff Working Documents including Country Specific Recommendations and, above all, the conditionalities associated with the Excessive Deficit Procedure, which some have labelled the Excessive Poverty Procedure (Cvijanović, 2015). At the same time the soft 'techno-zone' of the Social Open Method of Co-ordination and visions of a 'green' and 'inclusive' EU as in the Europe 2020 strategy are de-emphasised or treated as little more than 'fictions' which result in new indicators, and endless reports, but not much more. Discourses on 'social inclusion' are themselves now being marginalised in favour of more economistic ideas of 'social investment' which represent understandings from the core, and further erode support for those most oppressed and marginalised in society, whose voices are being more and more systematically ignored.

   Within South East Europe, and perhaps within a wider post-communist Eatern European landscape, international organisations have conspired with local political elites to translate a neoliberal paradigm of privatisation, deregulation and a residual social welfare system into a predatory project of resource capture and wealth distribution within elite networks. A 'crowded playground' (Arandarenko and Golicin, 2007) of actors have pushed reform in South East Europe in the process generating, occupying and transforming new emergent spaces of power. This includes the World Bank, the European Union and the International

Monetary Fund (the region's 'troika' before there ever was an EU 'troika'), but also many other bodies, some invented for the purpose of governing (the OHR in Bosnia-Herzegovina, UNMIK, and later EULEX in Kosovo), a Regional Co-Operation Council, numerous international NGOs and 'think tanks', and so on, also are involved. Many render extremely fuzzy the boundaries beween international and domestic actors, creating a hybrid and flexible 'intermestic sphere', a cadre or new class of interpreters, intermediaries and flex actors juggling roles and representations, offering their 'reform prescriptions' across a range of unstable sites and settings, and attempting to translate larger ideas of 'modernisation' into implementable schemes and projects, articulating a 'right to intervene' which itself allows for new assemblages of governance to emerge.

In South East Europe, a picture emerges of well-developed, if contradictory, socialist welfare arrangements undermined and replaced by uneven, hybrid, highly residualised, and increasingly punitive forms of welfare. Complex reconfigurations have occurred in conflict and post-conflict conditions, including a rapid de- and re-territorialisation of welfare, in which changing relationships between the formal and the informal, the public and the private, and between state and non-state actors co-exist with a range of diverse diaspora, migrant, cross-border and enclave welfare claims and entitlements. New welfare assemblages are emerging which are marked by multiple and assymetric citizenship rights, reproducing, but never reducible to, power relations of class, gender, ethnicity, age, disability, sexuality, and geographic location (Stubbs, 2015).

Azra Hromadžić (2015) has described the 'semi-absence' of both the family and the state in the context of post-war and post-socialist reconfigurations in Bosnia-Herzeogivina, inducing a crisis of care in which mere survival and the reproduction of the self and the management of intimate relationships of kin is a seemingly constant, never ending, struggle. Likewise, in her study of mothers of children with disability Čarna Brković (2015) argues that "the ambiguous ground of social protection", experienced as "erratic, unpredictable and mysterious", requires extreme flexiblity, to mobilise whatever resources they can, including any possible informal contacts, just to get a fraction of the services needed. Welfare users in both studies invoke a seemingly lost logic of welfare as a right and a duty of the state in the face of the realities of a system which is limited, discretionary and largely lacking in compassion. Survival depends on a constant struggle to find and gain access to the right people who, with enough luck, when "all the pieces fall into place", might support 'humanitarian actions' allowing the you to get by, at least for a while.

These emerging unstable "assemblages of welfare and care" in contemporary South East Europe are not merely a product of neo-liberal injunctions for the state to retreat. They are that, of course, but also much more. New ideologies, modalities and practices of care which are "fraught, uncertain and provisional" create new chains of meaning, new hierarchies of power and agency, new forms of inclusion and exclusion, new layerings of welfare, new regimes of blame and of virtue (recalibrations of what Andrea Muelehbach (2012) has termed 'moral citizenship'), and new marginalisations, subordinations and silences. They also alert us to what happens when social workers themselves, trying to survive on or near the poverty line, face many of the same struggles as service users.

Programme for the future

Any renewed radicalisation of social work and social policy will need to reconnect with a new wave of social movements and activist initiatives which are developing a politicised critique of the perverse confluences of neo-liberal and clientelistic capitalism. These movements do have connections with earlier, marginalised or forgotten, traditions in the region of South East Europe, as well as with global protests and initiatives including the World Social Forum, Occupy, and the Right to the City. The issue of the right to public space, in the face of dramatic instances of urban dispossession and the link to private gain for politicians, became central to many movements across the region. In addition, radicalised student movements have developed, opposing the commodification and marketisation of higher education and connecting this with wider struggles for social justice. New and important connections between feminist and workers' movements have also begun to address the precarious position of women workers in a number of sectors of the economy. An already well developed cultural politics is also taking a more radical turn. Connections are being made with anti-austerity movements, particularly in Greece and Spain, forming new spaces of protest and connection which are hotbeds of learning and laboratories for action, most importantly in terms of the idea of direct democracy, through citizens' Plenums.

Across diverse movements and struggles, the idea of the 'commons' resonates quite strongly. The practice of 'commoning', the active making and claiming of commons, and the protection of public space against enclosures, appropriations and commodifications, seems to offer a kind of unity in diversity, offering a new narrative for escaping the logic of austerity and envisioning more humane and ecologically sustainable alternatives. The idea of a social commons, perhaps most clearly articulated by Francine Mestrum (2014), could be central to a new progressive narrative of social policy and social work. These movements, then, are central to a new politics otherwise, opening up meaningful spaces for contestation, resistance and alternatives, a kind of talking and acting back to power which is not only different but might even make a difference. The interlinked crises of ecology, finance and social reproduction (Fraser, 2011), in which unregulated and multiple speculations have commodified the earth's resources, marketized access to social protection and undermined the value of care, requires a response which commits to the creation of public eco-social goods and the strengthening of eco-social justice struggles as a central principle of the commons challenging the growing commodification and marketization, and increasing inequalities of access to, social services.

The aim must be to construct a social policy and social work praxis which is always searching for connection to that which is 'beyond', which de Sousa Santos (2005) has termed a 'sociology of emergences' or a sociology of the 'not yet', which 'expresses what exists as mere tendency, a movement that is latent in the very process of manifesting itself'. The idea of 'social policy and social work otherwise' escapes a hyper-pessimism in which every alternative policy idea or practice is inevitably and inexorably disciplined, stripped of any progressive intent and content, and incorporated into the dominant hegemony, without lapsing into a wishful thinking, and under-empiricised, idealism about supposedly 'new' 'progressive' models, never stopping to address the 'black box' of implementation. In the search for new narratives and new winnable policy platforms, the emphasis should be as much, if not more, on grassroots, 'bottom-up', eco-social innovations and experiments than on traditional 'top-down' state and state-like actions as forms of 'social engineering' which tend

to reproduce, rather than transform, assymetrical relations of power. There is a need to articulate some of the ethical and political implications of what can be seen as a commitment to a "double orientation" to the movements of policy and power: to recognise hegemonic plans and projects; but to be attentive to their interruptions, disjunctures and challenges (Clarke *et al.*, 2015).

Arturo Escobar's concept of the 'pluriverse' (2011) forms a crucial part of this ethico-political stance, sensitive to voices outside of what Rojas (2007) has termed "the prevailing web of interlocutions", beyond mainstream policy knowledgesand rationalities, a world of many worlds, different knowledges, 'changing the subject', ensuring that other narratives are voiced and heard. A more radical articulation of 'social policy otherwise', then, might open up not only contested spaces and what Judith Butler (1993) has termed 'collective disidentification'. Another social policy world may be possible if we address replace politics as grand narrative with politics as interruption; replace a view from above or from nowhere with a 'methodologocal reflexivity' sensitive to multiple positionalities and standpoints, and, above all, address which voices are marginalized or silenced in policy processes.

As an example, in Bosnia-Herzegovina (B-H) in 2014, street protests occured in a number of cities, beginning in Tuzla when a group of laid-off workers were denied the right to protest peacefully. These protests were followed by Plenums in a smaller number of cities, citizens' assemblies based on principles of 'direct democracy', a policy translation from some of the student protests elsewhere in the region (Stubbs, 2012). These Plenums have articulated a set of demands, some of which had an immediate effect in terms of the resignation of a number of politicians and, even more crucially, some of these demands have been translated into policies and actions by district Parliaments which, if only momentarily, appear to have 'changed the nature of political discourse'. Many of these demands related to struggles for social justice. The linkage between Protests, Plenums and Parties is crucial (Štiks and Horvat, 2014). Although many have argued that the Plenums have 'run out of steam', came to nothing or been hijacked for ethnicised demands, recent responses to massive floods in B-H again offered a sharp contrast between citizens' organising and mutual support and diverse levels of state indifference and ineffectiveness. These events provide glimpses of 'policies and practices otherwise' not least in terms of an 'interruption' of hegemonic structures and processes and, crucially, as evidence of precisely the kind of creative expressions of the new, the unthought and the unexpected as Gibson-Graham (2006) have called them, which are needed. Perhaps alongside Štiks and Horvat's three Ps, we need to add two more: policies and practices, or at least to think about the significance of progressive social policies, forms of radical social and community work practices, and of engaged action and activist research. Can we conceive of these contributing to new narratives of social justice and welfare, a more humane ethics of care, recognising what Fiona Williams (2014) has termed "interdependence, mutuality, and human frailty", raising the social, economic and political value of welfare and care and suggestive of the the connections between struggles across and beyond the region?

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