Translation, Intermediaries and Welfare Reforms in South Eastern Europe

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Abstract

An emphasis on ‘transnational social policy’, encompassing the complex web and politics of ‘policy transfers’, and the impacts and influences of international agencies including the World Bank, in relation to diverse and changing state forms, is important for addressing the contemporary dynamics of welfare reform in South Eastern Europe. This paper seeks to go beyond the somewhat formalist and objectivist ‘welfare regime’ approach to these transformations by exploring elements of a new reflexive ethnography of social welfare reform, which focuses on emerging, hybrid, policy assemblages, contradictions, and contestations. The paper emphasises, in particular, the role of 'new' intermediaries or brokers operating in the space between 'global' and 'local' knowledge practices, and constitutive of new organisational topographies, multi-scalar networks, and flexible identities and identifications. The paper seeks to outline an agenda focusing on translation practices and brokerage in the context of ambiguities, multiplicities, potentialities and fragilities.
1. Introduction

We are living in a world ‘where boundaries do not really contain, but are often interestingly crossed’ (Hannerz, 1997) and where the multi-level, multi-sited, multi-agency, multi-scalar political, social and institutional morphology disturbs our familiar metaphors. Fluidity, transformation, the breakdown of previous conceptual understandings and new forms of vocabularies, trajectories and knowledge requires us to investigate new sites of fields of practices “less obvious than those of institutionalised politics and established bureaucracies” (Trouillot, 2001; 133). In seeking to study the role of ‘new’ intermediaries or brokers operating in the space between 'global' and 'local' knowledge practices, and constitutive of new organisational topographies, multi-scalar networks, and flexible identities and identifications, we focus on transnational consultancies as a site for critical scrutiny and empirical investigation. Such consultancies represent an important signifying practice for new forms of governmentality, located in translocal, interstitial spaces. In our view the emerging field of ‘transnational social policy’ needs to pay much greater attention to the role of consultancies in critical, complex and contested political, cultural, social, and discursive encounters.

The site of our ‘field work’, parts of South Eastern Europe, is often depicted as a region ‘in post-communist transition’ which, translates, in our exploration, into a site of an extremely rich spatiality of ‘in-betweenness’, of emerging transnational governmentality, of international ‘development’ discourse, of EU influence, and of post-colonial geographies. It is in this context that we address the role of policy consultants, experts, and ‘brokers’ in the unfolding of welfare reforms. Throughout, our concern is with disruptions to any notion of smooth, unproblematic, or conveyor-belt like notions of policy transfer, emphasising, instead, ambiguities, multiplicities, potentialities and fragilities.

Our methodology is, broadly speaking, anthropological and, above all, reflexive, in the sense that it involves looking back on our earlier work and seeking to reconsider, rethink, and re-assess the emphases of our texts and, in particular, to pay closer attention to “the relation and interaction between models and the world” which they adhere to, as part of a wider ambition of “permanently challenging those things that are taken for granted” (Ross, 2005; 5 and 8). Our work is an encounter between two scholars, one Hungarian living and working in the UK, the other British living and working in Croatia. Schooled in more empirical and normative traditions in social policy and social administration we have, each in our own ways, struggled to find our anthropological voices (cf. Lendvai, 2005; Stubbs, 2002), and to explore new relationships between research and praxis. Most recently, as part of a collaborative research group on ‘Transnational Governmentality’ we have begun to rethink our own work on Globalisation, Europeanisation and social policy in Central and South Eastern Europe. This paper, our first joint work, is an attempt to address theoretical issues in transnational social policy (section 2) through a number of vignettes, scenarios or case studies of reform encounters in South East Europe (SEE) (section 3). Synthesis is attempted in our conclusions (section 4) which outline a tentative future research agenda.
2. In a trans: notes on transnationalism, translation and transactors

2.1 Transnationalism and the de-centring of national social policy
Internationalisation, globalisation, glocalisation and transnationalisation as academic discourses and as a complex set of social practices pose distinctive challenges to the traditional boundaries of the discipline of social policy. Not only has the nation-state as a primary and confined unit for social and welfare policies been questioned, but new epistemological and ontological notions such as ‘spatiality’, ‘governmentality’, ‘hybridity’, ‘fluidity’, and ‘disjunctions’ de-centre our conceptual understandings and highlight the impoverished vocabulary of mainstream social policy. It has been argued that, in this globalised and transnationalised world, “important differences are not properly captured by the concept of social policy that is used ahistorically to represent state actions in both developed and developing societies, regardless of their different histories and different social conditions” (Baltonado, 1999:14, our emphasis). Transnationalism therefore, points not merely to “the intensified international struggle to shape welfare regimes” (Jessop, 2002), but also to the need to deconstruct the taken-for-granted conceptual apparatuses around ‘social policy’ and ‘welfare regimes’ developed in the Global North (Midgley, 2004) and vigilance against Western imperialism (Gupta, 2006: 230).

The transnationalisation of social policy, in Ferrera’s terms, results in “the redefinition of the boundaries of social sharing” (Ferrera, 2005; ). He maintains that three distinctive processes constitute these changes: the proliferation of levels of governance; the complex web of different coalitions between multiple actors; and the significant expansion of both ‘locality’ and ‘vocality’ options. Similarly, Zürn and Leibfried (2005) argue that the previously known national constellation of the state has been dispersed along territorial lines with far-reaching organisational changes leading to complex, diverse and competing processes.

Transnational frameworks de-centre state-oriented approaches and explicitly challenge the ‘methodological nationalism’ of much mainstream social policy. A new orthodoxy of ‘global social policy’ also needs to be questioned, since it remains based on a crude global-national dualism (cf. Robinson, 2001). Rather than merely a ‘scaling up’ of objectivist knowledge, there is a need to emphasise the interactions, the complexity and the liminality of encounters between actors, sites, scales and contexts. On the one hand, following Ferguson and Gupta, “it is necessary to treat state and nonstate governmentality within a common frame, without making unwarranted assumptions about their spatial reach, vertical height, or relation to the local” (Ferguson and Gupta, 2002; 994). On the other hand, the ability of actors to ‘jump scale’ should not be considered as unproblematic or universal, not least since “different languages, rhetorics, ideals, justifications and rationalities circulate at different scales” (Gould, 2004; 283). Above all, actors cannot be pre-defined prior to their engagement in particular practices and the researcher needs to constantly be open to the possibility of new organisational topographies and surprising alliances. The boundaries between state and non-state actors are breaking down, progressively producing a reallocation and reinvention of authority (Sinclair, 2000), and a new complexity of scale.
2.2 Translation as negotiation, transformation and displacement: mediating between global knowledge claims and local particularities

Translation

Policy transfers in the transnational space play a crucial role in transmitting ideas, institutional blueprints, discourses and knowledge claims between and across sites, scales and actors. Such policy transfers are never merely neutral or technical, although their presentation as such has real effects. Rather, policy transfers are always complex, socially, culturally and politically embedded translation practices. We refer to translation here not in a literal sense, but rather as a set of processes of negotiation, displacement, and transformation:

“Translating is not the same thing as transferring knowledge. ‘Transfer’ suggests an objectification or commodification of knowledge, extrapolated from its context, with the translator serving as a mere conduit or channel through whom the meaning simply passes. Even this simple model of knowledge transfer, however, incorporates the problem of ‘noise’ – a distortion of the original meaning – which recognizes the likelihood of altered meaning …”

(Yanow, 2004; 15)

‘Noise’ and the mediation, distortion, and recreation of transferred knowledge which it entails, is crucial, and points to one of the central contradictions of transnational governmentality, namely the clash between the ‘universalistic logic’ of development programmes, policy advice and global knowledge claims on the one hand, and the cultural, political and social particularities of their diverse meanings, interactions, consequences and resistances on the other. The ‘sociology of translation’ as developed by Latour and Law as a theory of knowledge and a theory of agency (Law, 1992), which sets out “to explore and describe local processes of patterning, social orchestration, ordering and resistance”, is central to our exploration of policy reform in SEE.

Viewing translation as “a continuous process through which individuals transform the knowledge, truths and effects of power each time they encounter them” (Herbert-Cheshire, 2003:456), emphasises the formation of ‘actor networks’. ‘Translation’ occurs because all enrolled in the network are ‘active members’ who shape and transform claims, artefacts, discourses, and interpretations according to their different projects (Latour, 1987); and because actors and ‘actants’ enrolled in the network are “sustaining and adapting their own practices and discourses, actively paralleling and even displacing those of political authorities” (O’Malley, 1996: 316). Emphasising processes of formation, transformation and contestation suggests that policy transfer is never an automatic or unproblematic, taken-for-granted, process. Rather, it suggests the need to pay attention to the ways in which policies and their schemes, content, technologies and instruments are constantly changing according to sites, meanings and agencies. Translation, then, is a form of ‘active readership’, with policy actively and continuously (re)interpreted and read by various audiences, and transformed in various actor network constellations. The sociology of translation provides “a language by which we can begin to explore the interrelation of discourse and agency” (Newton, 1996; 731). In this theoretical frame social structure is not a noun, but rather treated as a verb (Law, 1992), accentuating a relational approach that emphasises heterogeneity, uncertainty, fluidity and contestation.

Translation should not, of course, be seen in an apolitical context but, is, rather, the very working of power. In postcolonial theory, recognising that a root meaning of ‘translate’ is ‘to conquer’ (Kiberd, 1995; 624) so that ‘cultural translation’ is a significant site of a ‘re-
ordering of worlds’ (Loomba, 1998; 101), there is a focus on representation, power and historicity (Niranjana, 1992). Translation then becomes a process of re-representation, re-ordering, and re-grounding through various discursive and material practices. Crucially, translation is also seen as a process of displacement and dislocation (Callon, 1986), which raises critical questions around the issue of translatability and transferability (of ideas, policies, and so on). The sociology of translation considers the particular ways by which ‘objects’, ‘knowledge’ and ‘facts’ are produced through displacement or suppression of dissenting voices, or of those ‘facts unfit to fit’ (Gebhardt, 1982: 405). All in all, it calls for a critical interrogation of knowledge practices, policy transfer processes and political technologies in the translation processes.

Table 1. The different ‘vocabulary’ between mainstream ‘policy transfer’ literature and sociology of translation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Keywords for the mainstream policy transfer literature</th>
<th>Keywords for the sociology of translation approach</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>Deconstruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy transfer, diffusion, learning</td>
<td>Translation, transferability, displacement,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>normalisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Policy change/stability</td>
<td>Transformation, hybridity, fluidity,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>reflexivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptation, dissemination</td>
<td>Negotiation, en-actment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Goodness of fit’</td>
<td>‘Unfit to fit’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutions</td>
<td>Knowledge networks, Actor networks, agency,</td>
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<td></td>
<td>social relations, processes</td>
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From the point of view of our interest in the transnational governmentality of welfare reforms in SEE, the issue of transferring ideas, discourses, knowledge claims and practices across sites, scales and spaces is a central concern. Here, however, we radically diverge from the mainstream literature on policy transfer (Table 1). While the policy transfer literature with its realist ontology sees ‘policy’ both in the source and in the recipient context as a stable, pre-existing, and uncontested ‘reality’ and the transfer as a more or less linear process, a sociology of translation works with a much more fluid and dynamic framework. For scholars using sociology of translation:

“… policy does not exist somewhere else in finished form, but is finished/produced in the act of transfer. Policy is not available to be looked at and learned from, but is produced in the act of looking. Policy is the output of a series of communications, not its input. The issue is one of germination, not dissemination”.  
(Freeman, 2004; 2)

From this perspective, policy transfer is not about the dialectic of stability versus change (adaptation versus resistance), determined by the goodness of fit (centring on the issue of distance), a process steered primarily by institutions, which theoretically works with a very limited notion of power (meaning the power of ‘veto points’ to block change). Instead, the policy transfer process should be seen as one of continuous transformation, negotiation, and enactment on the one hand and as a politically informed process of dislocation and displacement (‘unfit to fit’), on the other hand.

1 In particular applied by the Europeanisation scholarship
'Contact zones'

One aspect of this is the notion of ‘contact zones’ which involve “the spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect” (Pratt, 1992: 6). A contact zone is a kind of in-between or ‘interstitial’ space akin to Homi Bhaba’s notion of the ‘third space’ which is never fixed but is, rather, always becoming (Bhaba, 1995; 208), characterised by forces and directions rather than forms or dimensions. Pratt suggests that a ‘contact zone’ perspective “foregrounds the interactive, improvisational dimensions of colonial encounters so easily ignored or suppressed by diffusionist accounts of conquest and domination.” (Pratt, 1992: 6-7). Whilst offering, in Bhaba’s terms, the possibility of eluding ‘the politics of polarity’ (Bhaba, 1995; 209), the term emphasises “copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically assymetrical relations of power” (Pratt, 1992; 6-7) or, in James Clifford’s terms “a power-charged set of exchanges” (Clifford, 1997; 192). In the ‘contact zone’ encounters are rarely, or rarely only, about words and their meaning but are, almost always, more or less explicitly, about claims-making, opportunities, strategic choices and goals, interests, and resource maximisation. In the ‘contact zones’, all kinds of complex negotiated interactions occur, on multiple stages, as well as off-stage.

Translation and the notion of ‘contact zones’ are used in our framework to signal new ways of thinking about the transnational governmentalty of welfare reforms in a ‘transitional’ context. Along with Kendall (2004), we would argue that scales and spaces are neither pre-existing categories, nor are they separable into ‘global’ and ‘local’ with a dialectical logic to them. Importantly, spaces and scales are not given, but made, primarily through actor networks, which are always plural, multiple and contingent. As Kendall (2004, 69) argues ‘space, like scale, is invented by networks, rather than a neutral canvas on to which our networks are laid’. In that sense, South Eastern Europe is actively constituted and reconstituted by various actor networks, ‘networks composed of various longer or shorter connections … hybrids, mixing freely the human and the non-human, the material and the social, the semiotic and the natural’ (Kendall, 71). In these fluid, contingent, plural and multiple actor networks, policy brokers play an important role in ordering and reordering welfare issues.

2.3 Intermediaries, brokers and consultants: transactors in translation

Translation as a process needs translators, including a growing cadre of transnational policy consultants and experts, who do more than merely provide ‘technical’ knowledge and ‘disinterested analysis’, but are actors in their own right. This text concentrates on the new intermediaries and interlocutors in terms of their relationality, interstitiality and liminality, which is assumed to be reflexive of crucial processes of new scalarities, spatialities and sociality, new forms of governmentalities, power and compliance, discursive practices, knowledge systems, and semiotic innovations. Whether we call these actors ‘strategic brokers’ (Larner and Craig, 2005), ‘boundary spanners’ (Williams, 2002); ‘interlocutors’ (Bellier and Wilson, 2000), ‘border crossers’ (Gupta and Ferguson, 2002), ‘transactors’ (Wedel, 2004), ‘cultural brokers’ (Trevillion, 1991) or ‘cultural workers’ (Giroux, 1992), there is a growing recognition, from a number of sub-disciplines, of their importance.

‘Consultancy’ in general, and transnational consultancy practices in particular, are increasingly influential, yet, highly under-researched, subjects. Beyond acknowledgement
of the power of ‘reputational intermediaries’ in ‘global knowledge networks’ (Stone, 2002, 2004), and occasional studies of their role in Central and Eastern Europe in the context of fundamental and sometimes rapid attempts at comprehensive political and economic transformation (Wedel, 2000; de la Porte and Deacon, 2002), we know very little about their actual operations. Consultancy firms and consultants play a very significant role as translators and ‘transactors’ in development and aid programmes, as well as in public policy and welfare reforms taking place in the second and third worlds and, to an extent, in the developed world (cf. Stubbs, 2003). Of course, there are “many varieties of consultant and many varieties of consultancy assignment” involving “different kinds of engagements, …development sites … (and) different scopes and levels of responsibility” (Apthorpe, 2004) and, indeed, ‘complexity and variability’ also has to be framed in terms of consultants’ relationships with ‘clients’ (cf. Sturdy et al, 2005).

The different theoretical frames and takes on ‘consultants’ and ‘consultancies’ emphasise different core qualities. Some frame them in the grand narrative of ‘global knowledge networks’. Sinclair (2000) argues that transnational consultancy firms are important ‘knowledge actors’ in what he calls ‘embedded knowledge networks’ defined as:

> “... ostensibly private institutions that possess authority because of their publicly acknowledged track records for solving problems, often acting as disinterested ‘technical’ parties in high-value high-risk transactions, or in validating sets of norms and practices for a variety of service provision activities.”

(Sinclair, 2000; 488)

Similarly, Stone amplifies the role of consultants and consultancies in ‘global networks’ and sees consultancy firms as ‘reputational intermediaries’ acting often as ‘transfer agents’ facilitating exchange between a number of polities (Stone, 2002, 2004). Other accounts focus more on organisational and institutional scale. Jones (2004) for example sees consultancy firms as a forerunner of what he calls ‘organisational globalisation’, where new working practices are introduced at the level of firms, whereby the movement of employees between offices, countries and continents is promoted. Larner and Craig’s work focuses on ‘strategic brokers’, who work in multiple institutional and community sites, and who are both advocates for the organisations which employ them, often on temporary contracts, but also of more relational forms of practice. The active criss-crossing of boundaries, and the creation of new spaces through attention to process issues means that they:

> “... can facilitate, mediate, negotiate, nurture networks, and deploy cultural knowledge and local knowledge in ways that enable traditionally ‘silent’ voices to be heard.”

(Larner and Craig, 2005; 418)

Brokers work in innovative spaces and create new alliances, new networks and meanings and forge new potentialities. Their ‘enablement skills’ moves them beyond the formalistic and bureaucratic requirements into a space where ‘things get done’ because “they have the vision, the networks and practical implementation skills to take things a whole step further” (Larner and Craig, 2005; 416). In creatively engineered spaces, brokers are social entrepreneurs who empower, mentor and facilitate new communication channels, new associations, and generate institutional and situational reflexivities. According to Taylor (2005), brokers can be catalysts for new kinds of institutional responsiveness although, in many ways, it is less the objectivist fact of this per se, than the perception of such which is important, especially in the context of the importance of reform in SEE.
However highly acclaimed the qualities of consultants, they always operate in a political context, which unsettles and complicates their seemingly technical skills. Indeed, as Larner and Craig suggest, brokers often become professionalised and skilled in multiple intersected and intertwined institutional and organisational sites, and can become politically embedded and ‘governmentalised’ in far less progressive, transformatory, counter-hegemonic ways as:

“... the political context of their work remains fraught, with their activities directly linked to the politicisation of local issues, while at the same time they are increasingly required to make their political claims technical, or turn their contest into collaboration.”

(Larner and Craig, 2005:419)

This later aspect is also emphasised within the literature on the ‘new managerialism’ associated with the contemporary neoliberal project. In this context policy consultants may be seen as the embodiment of the ‘neo-liberal’, or at least its ‘little brother’ (Voipio, 2003), the technocratic imposition of specific knowledge in a discursively depoliticised context and the privatisation of policy-making processes. In a sense, we would reject an ‘either-or’, or a global versus local narrative on their role and, instead, suggest that a plurality of positionalities is inevitable, and that it is the complexities of these positions which are worthy of study.

Of greater interest, then, is the ‘flexibility’ or ‘hybridity’ of transactors. Here, we are less concerned with the celebration of hybridity in postcolonial theories as the “consciousness of one’s own particular borderlands” (Asher, 2005) or as entertaining “difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (Bhabha, 1994: 4). Rather, our focus is on the ways in which policy experts and consultants are located in ‘hybrid spaces’: in-between scales, organisations, discursive practices, knowledge systems, and geographies, as located in a kind of ‘liminality’ characterised by a ‘blurring and merging of distinctions’ (Czarniawaska and Mazza, 2003).

Janine Wedel's work points to the importance of multiplex networks (Wedel, 2004; 165), where players know each other, and interact, in a variety of capacities, with multiple identities (which she terms ‘transidentities’), and in a variety of roles. Her tale is one of shifting and multiple agency, promoted in part by what she terms ‘flex organisations’, which have a ‘chameleon-like, multipurpose character’, with transactors within them ‘able to play the boundaries’ between national and international; public and private; formal and informal; market and bureaucratic; state and non-state; even legal and illegal (ibid; 167).

Of course, the nature of this 'playing of the boundaries' remains context specific. The complexity in terms of transnational consultancies lies in the relationship between the international (often conceived as a 'donor') and the national (conceived as a 'client' or 'counterpart'). Forms of authority and control are always even more complex in these contexts, we would suggest.

2.4 The Project Mode: a note on projectisation

The space that is afforded to consultants, constructing their available subject positions, is formed by various ‘technologies’, or as Latour and Law would call these non-human actors, ‘actants’ within the actor networks, such as time frame, work templates, analytic devices, and so on. From this perspective, a crucial aspect of the work of consultants is the process of ‘projectisation’ that both provides the necessary formative inscriptions, while in a very
real sense limiting their knowledge practices. Although ‘projects’ are a quasi hegemonic form of ‘development’ both in the context of the ‘developmental’ agenda of international organisations working in South East Europe as well as for EU funds, we know very little about the impact and consequences of ‘projectisation’ in the field of social welfare reform. Kovach and Kucerova (2006) have argued recently that Central Europe is witnessing the emergence of a new ‘project class’. In riding the waves of the ‘projectification’ of development policies, in their case induced primarily by EU funds, this project class actively reconfigures local power structures, and transforms the policy space (in this case, the domain of ‘rural policy’) into an ‘open project market’ with far reaching consequences on local power, redistribution and actor configuration. As Kovach and Kucerova argue, projectification is far from being only a technical process - it is a deeply inscribed political process. Gasper (1999), taking the specific example of the widespread usage of a ‘logical framework’ approach to projects, argues that they are rather more like ‘logic-less frames’, ‘lack-frames’ and ‘lock-frames’ in that they are unable to grasp the complexity of local contexts, processes and developments. Indeed, inscriptions, formats, templates, toolkits, benchmarks, and time frames not only have cognitive, but political implications too. Here, crucial questions arise in terms of how then are ‘projects’, ‘projectisation’ and more broadly donor policies able to respect and embrace socio-cultural contexts, historical memories (Stubbs, 2002), identities (Helms, 2003) and the ‘human’ in its universalistic appeal? Transnational consultancies within ‘projects’ are increasingly important discursive and practice forms, and are often based on assumptions of the possibility of achieving sufficient cross-cultural understanding within narrow time frames (consultancies are measured in days, not years even if the project lasts for a number of years). The transnational consultant is rarely oriented to ‘this place and this time’, her or his reference is to other places or a mythic blank slate canvas.

Considering the key role played by consultants in projects of welfare reforms in SEE, the various ‘technologies’, inscriptions, and non-human actors constitute a crucial element in the way consultants produce and re-produce knowledge, put forward knowledge claims, allow certain agendas to emerge, while actively silencing others and construct (both discursively and practically) the subject positions of politicians, ‘welfare subjects’ and communities.

Projects as templates are indeed both ephemeral and temporal in nature, operating within fixed timescales that pay little attention to what has gone before or will take place after. These projects frame social and political practices, where the technical and the political are intertwined in complex ways, suggesting the need for a series of systematic deconstructions to better understand these processes and their implications. Importantly, while on the one hand, we emphasise that projects and the processes of projectisation are important hegemonic forms and templates for welfare reforms in SEE, it is also important to note that these ‘projects’ never form an absolute hegemonic ‘structure’. Indeed, projects produce very complex practices, where the ownership over, and the understanding and the implementation of those projects are always fluid, multiple and contested. The social welfare worker in a public agency, however threatened or silenced by these processes does, in a sense, have time and place on their side. Projects might well be the riverbed or the container for the formation of actor networks, creating strong boundaries (with its tacit dimension of exclusion and inclusion), yet, with the constant formation and re-formation of actor networks and the shifting (flexi)-identities of actors, the ‘outcome’ always remains uncertain and, in a sense, unfinished.

The two fragments or vignettes regarding the role of consultants in welfare reforms are based on case studies in two South-East European countries, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia. Both represent projects and programmes where the UK Government’s Department for International Development (DFID) and the World Bank, sometimes together and
sometimes separately, develop a set of projects or ‘technical assistance’ to formulate the reform of social welfare. Both case studies involve one of the authors of this paper (Stubbs) as a consultant working for DFID. As such, they represent a first step in the reflexive study of translation practices in SEE.

3. In the Reform Contact Zones: fragments and vignettes from South Eastern Europe

3.1 Bosnia-Herzegovina: flexible agencification, the virtual state, and multiple social policies

The photograph above was taken during the final session of a one-day conference on social policy held in Sarajevo on 31 January 2006. The four people on the ‘front-stage’ are framed by many of the technologies of power associated with such events. They all have plastic name tags around their necks and name cards in front of them. A screen at the back allows for the showing of power point presentations, and a flip chart is available for displaying the more immediate results of group discussions, as befits this ‘feedback’ session. Of most interest, perhaps, is the conference banner behind the speakers. It displays, clearly, in two languages, the title of the conference, with the English language version on top. The place and date are shown, thus:

**Sarajevo, 31. januar/siječanj/January 2006.**

Three languages are used here, because the Croatian version of the month (siječanj) differs from the Serbian and Bosniak versions (januar).

More complexity is introduced by the six logos arranged on the bottom representing the conference organisers and/or sponsors. From left to right these are:
1. DFID, the UK Government’s Department for International Development, with wording only in English and with no reference to their UK or Governmental origin;
2. IBHI-BIH, the Independent Bureau for Humanitarian Issues, a Bosnian-based International Non-Governmental Organisation, again with wording only in English, although the abbreviation BIH is, itself, a standardised version of the local language name of the country Bosna i Hercegovina;
3. The Delegation of the European Commission to BH, also only in the English language;
4. The Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Policy of the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina. This is the Ministry of one of the two entities of the state of Bosnia-Herzegovina. The coat-of-arms of the entity contains emblems associated with the Bosnjak (Muslim) and Croat (Catholic) communities, as well as that of the EU. Here the languages of Bosnia-Herzegovina are used and, significantly, the text refers to the Federation in the context of the state as a whole.
5. The World Bank, with text in English dispensing, even, with the word ‘The’; and
6. The Ministry of Health and Social Protection of the Serbian-entity usually referred to by its name in local language ‘Republika Srpska’. The text here is in the Cyrillic variant and, hence in Serbian language, with no reference to the central state.

The conference followed a Social Impact Assessment commissioned by DFID and co-authored by one of the authors of this paper (Stubb), following two major DFID-funded technical assistance projects in the field of social policy, both implemented by the UK-based consultancy company Birks Sinclair and Associates Limited (web: http://www.birks-sinclair.com) and IBHI (web: http://www.ibhibih.org). Its aim was “to strengthen the dialogue between the BIH government, civil society and the international community around the delivery of better social services for the most poor and excluded people in Bosnia and Herzegovina” (Conference Background papers).

The ‘contact zone’ in the picture is, of course, far more complex than a simple distinction between ‘international’ and ‘local’ would suggest. The DFID staff member pictured, who holds the title of ‘Social Development Advisor’ is, herself of Argentinian origin whilst holding an Italian passport. She speaks in the final session in English with simultaneous translation provided. Stubbs, whilst British, lives and works in neighbouring Croatia and has undertaken a number of consultancies in Bosnia-Herzegovina. He speaks in a variant of the local languages and is chairing and facilitating the final session. On the right of the picture is the Director of a public agency the Centre for Social Work in Banja Luka, the capital of Republika Srpska.

The person about to present the conclusions from one small group is employed in EPPU, the acronym, which exists only in English, of the Unit for Economic Policy Planning and Implementation of the BiH Medium Term Development Strategy which was established in April 2004, and which is linked to the Office of the Chairman of the BiH Council of Ministers, the main central state political body which much of the international community has been seeking to strengthen as part of a more general ‘state building strategy’ in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Importantly, EPPU has no formal status within Bosnia-Herzegovina so that it is very much a donor-driven creation, which diverse donors, in their stated desire to build capacity, actually seek to steer in all kinds of different directions. EPPU can, perhaps, best be understood as a kind of ‘flexible agencification’ in which a ‘hiving off’ of traditional functions of the state to new autonomous or semi-autonomous agencies is combined with the ability or need of these agencies to exhibit shifting and multiple identities, roles, mandates and representations. The person concerned is, actually, in a post fully funded by DFID.
Missing from the picture, but also on the front stage, is the Resident Director of IBHI-BIH, Dr. Žarko Papić. An economist by training, he was the Yugoslav Ambassador to the OECD when Yugoslavia had observer status prior to the wars, and previously served as the Yugoslav Minister of Planning. On his return from Paris to Sarajevo in 1996, he became known as a leading anti-nationalist intellectual, regularly contributing articles to political journals, publishing academic texts, and sitting on the management board or being an active member of a number of key Bosnian and international NGOs, including the Open Society Institute, the International Forum Bosnia and Circle 99. Papić’s links with Stubbs can be traced back to as early as 1997, and has involved the explicit positioning of IBHI as a lead agency for social policy projects in Bosnia-Herzegovina, including successive projects funded by the Government of Finland and DFID, where Stubbs was a member of the planning teams. Subsequently, IBHI has worked closely, also, with UNICEF, with the Swiss Government, and with the World Bank on various technical assistance projects in the social protection arena.

In many ways, Papić occupies a key position as a strategic broker in social policy reform in Bosnia-Herzegovina. In part, this is a product of multiple and shifting identities, both achieved and ascribed, roles, mandates, and representations: he is both ‘international’ and ‘domestic’; he is ‘Bosnian’ but also ‘Yugoslav’, as well as having various sub-national identities which he has himself cited in order to ease his work in Republika Srpska. He is both an economist and a social policy expert and, crucially, combines the intellectual capital of being a critical independent thinker, with the skills of an experienced diplomat and politician, and the organisational resources of a large NGO behind him. His stance on social policy reform can best be termed ‘non-ideological modernism’, and he is skilled in using project resources to produce a kind of ‘instrumental conformism’, through which Deputy Ministers, heads of public agencies and academics are all paid honoraria to reproduce a new consensus on social policy. He is known for his ability to mobilise his organisation to produce well-organised conferences, timely and well-written publications and, above all, well-run projects. His powerful position in social policy stems, we would suggest, less from a critical intellectual commitment found in his more politicised interventions, he is equally at home with World Bank as with DFID agendas, and derives rather more from his technical skills, connections, and use of resources. His title in the last reform project, funded by DFID, was, significantly symbolic: ‘BiH Social Policy Coordinator’.

Absent from the photograph and, indeed, from the entire conference and impact assessment which preceded it, is anyone from the UK consultancy company Birks Sinclair and Associates, Ltd (BSAL). In this case, absence denotes less powerlessness than, rather, the speed with which international consultancy companies move from one country ‘assignment’ or project to another. BSAL is not one of the larger ICC’s. It has, however, established a significant niche in terms of social policy reform in Central and Eastern Europe, with its web site stating that it is “one of the principal providers of advice on economic and social policy in transition economies,” which has “…during the last ten years …designed programmes for development agencies with a value in excess of £1 Bn, and supported client ministries and agencies in implementing programmes with a total value of in excess of £100 million.” (Company website).

Critical academic scrutiny of BSAL is rare. They “were not willing to co-operate” (de la Porte and Deacon, 2002; 56) with a study of EU social policy contractors, despite having been the framework contractor for Central and Eastern Europe PHARE social protection projects which meant that, between 1996 and 1999, the company, which boasts on its web site that it has “over 1400 individual consultants and organisations (who) have registered an
interest in working with us”, undertook some 50% of all EU social policy projects in CEE, charging higher rates per consultant day than the norm, to reflect higher management costs. de la Porte and Deacon, based on an interview with an EU official, suggest:

“The general opinion of … Birks Sinclair is that it was a “body shopper”, meaning that they knew the requirements for making good technical and financial proposals, but once awarded the contract, were not particularly interested in the project”

(de la Porte and Deacon, 2002; 57).

Given potential conflict of interest, since Stubbs was both involved in the design of one of the DFID social policy projects and, subsequently, worked as a consultant for BSAL in the first year of implementation, the Social Policy Impact Assessment is somewhat vague and low-key in its critique of BSAL, with one of its conclusions being:

“.. that such long-term, flexible, multi-level projects are hard to implement and, indeed, require a ‘new generation’ of implementers willing to be flexible, go beyond the ToRs, identify agents and coalitions for change, and continually reflect upon the implications of local political economies”

(Stubbs and Maglajlić, 2006; 7).

As well as representing something of a new DFID orthodoxy, the quote reflects a view by some who have worked with BSAL that they do not lose interest in a project but, rather, technicise it, adhering to the letter of the Terms of Reference and producing many well written but, ultimately, non-threatening texts. Their liminality appears, then, to be defined in relation to the ability to move from one project to another and one country to another and to occupy a space which manages to protect reputation at all costs. In fact, the company is owned by two people who tend to have a roster of favoured consultants who, in age, origin and profile, most resemble the owners.

This extended case study illustrates a number of points about welfare reform in contemporary Bosnia-Herzegovina. Firstly, it is precisely Bosnia-Herzegovina’s ambiguous status as a kind of ‘virtual state’ which makes possible a ‘projectisation’ of social policy in which diverse kinds of intermediaries and strategic brokers hold sway. Secondly, the study reveals the complexity of various kinds of ‘positionality’ (cf. Gould, 2004; 269) with a result that there is no normative consensus on desirable social policy. Furthermore, as one of us has argued elsewhere, consultancy modes tend to silence welfare subjects or, rather, to render them as objects to be fetishised within particular sub-projects (cf. Stubbs, 2002; 324).
Diagram 1. The social protection project Croatia – structure

Govt of Croatia

Steering Committee

Bureau of Statistics

Min Lab & Soc Welfare

Implementing Committee

Team Leader (EISS)

Social Assistance (PAI)

Social Services

Labour & Employment (IJF)

Capacity Strengthening

Fiscal & Decentral (PADCO)

Admin/IT/DB (Maxwell Stamp)

Poverty Mon. (Ivo Pilar)

The World Bank

DFID
3.2 Croatia: ‘agents of change’, complex consultancy arrangements, and repoliticised technocracy

The diagram reproduced above is a copy of one produced at the beginning of a one year long project of technical assistance to the Government of Croatia in April 2002. The diagram has been simplified only in terms of removing all names, addresses and contact details. Known as the Social Protection Project (SPP), this World Bank project was funded, to a sum of around 1m. USD, by DFID and by a trust fund operated by the Government of Japan. The credit was meant to lead to a significant loan arrangement. In one of the more dramatic examples of sub-contracting, no less than nine different consultancy teams, companies or individuals, were contracted to work on the reforms covering the following themes or roles:

2. Social services: two British men, including one of the co-authors of this paper, directly recruited by DFID;
3. Labour and employment: an individual Croatian male consultant based in the Croatian Institute of Public Finance, web: http://www.ijf.hr/;
4. Fiscal issues and decentralization: the largest team, from PADCO, web: http://www.padco.aecom.com/ led by a Ukrainian woman
5. Administrative strengthening, led by a British man contracted to Maxwell Stamp, web: http://www.maxwellstamp.com/
6. Poverty monitoring, another large, all Croatian, team led by a Croatian woman and institutionally linked to the Croatian Ivo Pilar Institute of Social Sciences, web: http://www.pilar.hr/
7. A capacity strengthening team, led by a British man and an American man, meant to supervise, respectively, the labour and employment and poverty monitoring teams;
8. A team leader, a British man, at the time the Director of the European Institute for Social Services, web: http://www.kent.ac.uk/eiss/;
9. A local resources management team, headed by a Croatian man, responsible for administrative services and also for the provision of local experts to support the teams which were headed by foreign consultants. The contract was held by the Croatian market research and public opinion consultancy TARGET, web: http://www.target.hr/portal/.

A number of observations can be made about the structure as a ‘diagram of power’. The project appears weighted equally towards the client, the Government of Croatia and, in particular, the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, and the key international agencies funding and/or administering the project, the World Bank and DFID. The eight consultancy teams, under the overall direction of a team leader, are meant to respond to and act in accordance with these structures. In addition, although perhaps less visible, there are three ways in which ‘international’ and ‘local’ consultants interact. Where a consultancy team is entirely Croatian (as with the Poverty Monitoring and Labour and Employment components) then an additional international consultant is hired as a supervisor, noted here as the capacity strengthening component. Secondly, the local resources team both manages the day-to-day administration of the project but also supplies local expert consultants to help the foreign-led teams. Thirdly, most notably in the PADCO team, an international
team leader is accompanied by a number of Croatian consultants. The lead consultants are overwhelmingly either British or American although the PADCO consultant is from the Ukraine. The wide range of types of consultancy companies is illustrative, with some academically-based and social policy focused (EISS), others more economically focused (PADCO and Maxwell Stamp). The individual consultants within the teams range from full-time employees (as in the case of the Director of EISS) to those who have never before worked for a particular company (as with Maxwell Stamp). To add to the complexity, one of the co-owners of the private Croatian consultancy company TARGET is a researcher in the publicly-funded Ivo Pilar Institute which holds the contract for poverty monitoring.

In reality, implementation proceeded along rather more complicated trajectories than even the diagram suggests. The Steering Committee, involving a number of Ministers and key agencies, almost never met and, certainly, did not play a steering role. In addition, as a result of maternity leave of the international staffer, the World Bank was primarily represented by a local staff person, so that a strong DFID Social Development advisor, perhaps, held more sway intellectually but found it hard to secure support from the World Bank for his ideas. Crucially, the main counterpart from the Government side was a newly appointed Assistant Minister, Dr Nino Žganec, himself an academic in the School of Social Work of the University of Zagreb who was seen explicitly by the international actors as the ‘agent of change’. In addition and, perhaps, not surprisingly, the teams tended not to work together but, rather, to pursue their own agendas. Early on, trust between the teams broke down and, in addition, one contract was terminated at the instigation of the Ministry. Later, the team leader himself lost his position and de facto leadership was provided by PADCO, commissioned to write the key synthesis report. PADCO, now part of the AECOM company which, in 2005 generated 2.4 billion USD revenue (web: http://www.aecom.com/About/36/89/index.jsp), is much more associated with USAID funded fiscal reform projects in CEE than with social policy. The team was, indeed, most prone to use the language of marketization and mobilised strong links with the Ministry of Finance and were seen to be able to get things done, in part at least, as a result of using the services of a key US-Croatian intermediary who himself had close links with the TARGET-based project administrator.

In many ways, this ability to get things done over-rode any fundamental discussion of the politics of reform. Over time, the Assistant Minister found himself subject to pressures from Ministry civil servants, tending to want to limit the ‘radicalism’ of change, and from political appointees, tending to wonder why change was so slow in the context of the precedent of ‘successful’ pension reform. Eventually, an election intervened and, although the same Assistant Minister secured promotion to the position of State Secretary, for a variety of reasons his position became much less secure. Indeed, he later resigned from his position. The new Minister, now of Health and Social Welfare in a reorganised government structure, made it clear that repairs to infrastructure should be more central to the loan and nominated a ruling party (HDZ) member of Parliament, a medical doctor, to oversee the reforms on the Government side. Many new consultants came and went, with the World Bank now playing a role dominated by internal criticism of the time delays. A Swedish consultant and the new Ministry co-ordinator appeared to find common ground in terms of a reform plan based on reference or referral centres (the term was not clear and changed in translation from English to Croatian languages), and pilot projects are now being
funded in three Counties all controlled by the ruling party, with the support of the Swedish Government aid agency SIDA. Crucially, the politicised question of social assistance expenditure has been detached from the overall reform and is part of a different conditionality (cf. Stubbs and Zrinščak, 2006).

The case study illustrates the limited effect of external actors and the problems which derive from the pinning of hopes for reform on an individual ‘change agent’. The case study is also relevant for the way in which, in the end, national political objectives allied quite well with external technical imperatives. Overall, the marginal position of social protection meant that economists and lawyers tended to have more say than social workers and social welfare experts. Whilst consultations did take place, there was no real structure to allow for workers on the ground to contribute to policy reform and above all, the voice of service users themselves was never heard. The liminality of the consultants was, in the end, matched by that of the change agent themselves, squeezed out by twin pressures of technical imperatives to be seen to be doing something and political expediency.

4. Conclusions: Studying Welfare Reform As Translation

This paper has done no more than scratch the surface of the importance of seeing welfare reform as translation. Notions such as ‘welfare’, ‘welfare policy’, ‘welfare regimes’ and ‘welfare reforms’ work from very different epistemological and ontological positions. There is a rather hegemonic, deeply rooted, realist tradition, which sees welfare as a set of technocratic issues, framing the process of welfare reforms in terms of divergence vs. convergence; and policy change vs. policy stability, and which treats ‘policy’ as unproblematic and, in a sense prior to the transfer process. On the other hand, a poststructuralist, post-modern construction of welfare and social policy tends to see the transformation of welfare in terms of ‘governmentality’, ‘discourses’, and ‘subjectivities’.

Our tentative theoretical emphasis on translation, contact zones, and the role of consultancies suggests that ‘welfare reforms’ are not simply rationally engineered processes, nor are they reducible to discursive structures. Rather, they are complex, multiple and fluid processes of knowledge production, meaning-making, and claims-making. Instead of seeing the reform process as conforming and moving towards different (yet universal) types of ‘welfare regimes’, cast by separable ‘state’ and ‘non-state’ actors of ‘institutionalised politics’, we privilege a view of welfare reforms as an interactive, intensive, and liminal process. Structures, agents, and discourses all matter but in complex situationally specific and contested ways.

We argue that anthropological and ethnographic approaches can help to move us beyond a notion of reform which is based on the surface of formal institutional practices, ‘quantified’ and often uni-directionally claimed ‘trends’, or even reforms solely interpreted on the basis of a discourse analysis of key policy documents. A more dynamic and open-ended framework is required to unfold the complex interplay between discourses and ground-level practices, conflicting choices and pressures, between the ‘political’ and the ‘technical’, and indeed the metamorphosis of flexi-actors, criss-crossing sites, scales and spaces.
New hybrid concepts, terms and new theoretical perspectives are needed if we are to capture important fragments of this complex transformation process. This suggests the need to reconceptualise politics, institutions, and contexts themselves. Of course, the wider implications of this approach need to be developed in terms of multiple positionalities, no longer necessarily privileging either the nation state nor the complex ‘transition’ setting as in these case studies or vignettes. Many problems remain, of course, not least in terms of the situatedness of the reflexive observer and the dangers of over-emphasising interactions between agents, as well as the need to construct a new ethics of research on consultancy. There is much to recommend a translation approach, however, as worthy of exploration as part of an emerging reflexive ethnography of social welfare.

References


