

“Boundary work and ‘the political’ in social support arrangements”

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In their explanation of the rationale behind this workshop, the organizers Luann Good Gingrich and Stefan Koenigter outline at least two ways in which a transnational lens in social work leads us to concerns about social policy. First, they remind us that what we know as social policy in western welfare states, i.e. social policy ideas, organizations and programs mainly embedded within a national framework, has been shaped by transnational and global processes from the very beginning. This has happened (a) through ideas travelling across boundaries, (b) through transnational activities of organizations and (c) through the very development of the modern nation state within a system of border-crossing, international exchange processes at the time of the first wave of economic globalization. Following Nicola Yeates, – I quote – "it has never, in fact, been appropriate to think of welfare states and social policies as first and foremost the outcomes of national forces or divorced from the dynamics of the wider global geo-political order." (Yeates, 2011 p.636) Second, according to Luann and Stefan, transnational social support highlights the fact that actors' transnational practices on the micro level are subject to a number of social policy decisions and institutions in the realm of legislation, jurisdiction and administration on a variety of scales – e.g. the local, regional, national, and transnational – which they in turn also influence in complex ways. But how do we reimagine social policy toward transnational social support?

My contribution to this question does not pretend to offer an all-encompassing solution. Rather, I start from the assumption that we need a revised understanding of "the political" or the political process if we want to re-imagine social policy towards transnational social support. This proposition is backed up by the criticism on "methodological nationalism" in migration studies. This well-known position encourages us to inspect the naturalized categories and concepts we employ without thinking, both in theory and research (Wimmer/Glick Schiller, 2002). If we accept this invitation, how does it enable us to think of "the political" with regard to our concerns about transnational processes and dynamics in the realm of social work? Can we develop an understanding of "the political" and of social policy that is not caught in the clutches of the nation state and related frames of reference? And how could this in turn inform our research on social policy issues that emanate from our social work studies of transnational processes and interconnectedness?

In my presentation I would like to address these questions in two steps. I call the first "A very basic understanding of the political process" and the second "Implications for future research". The two will be followed by a short résumé. In my contribution I borrow some thoughts from the field of political philosophy and try to combine them with ideas on boundary work and classification in organizations developed in the sociology of scientific knowledge.

1. A very basic understanding of the political process

In recent years many scholars in the field of social policy have become aware of one important thing: our classical understanding of social policy, which is very much bound to the notion of a nation state or a national welfare state, has been challenged by a number of processes commonly referred to as transnationalization or globalization (J. Clarke 2005). Thus, in their attempts to take this into account, many approaches start from widely agreed definitions of social policy. Then they ask how those dynamics –broadly referred as globalization and transnationalization – impact on issues and fields linked to social policy (e.g. Deacon, 2007 pp.4-7). Subsequently, they find a definition of transnational or global social policy built upon an extended or revised concept of social policy. Further, some scholars embrace the idea that social policy offers us a sort or macro-perspective that helps us to move beyond the predominating individual (micro-) perspective in social work, which mainly focuses on service provision.

While I am not so much convinced by this micro/macro distinction, I am nevertheless interested in the relationship between social policy and social work when it is confronted with people's transnational lives. In particular, I'd like to highlight the processes on an interactional and organizational level and the potential contributions of transnational actors "from below" (Guarnizo/Smith 1998) towards changes in social policy. To understand the relationship between social policy and social work I will draw on an uncommon political understanding of social policy. Therefore, the first question I want to start with is the following.

How can "the political" in social policy be understood?

In order to shed light on this, I'd like to draw on a rather heretical understanding of "the political" presented by Jacques Rancière. Rancière offers a stimulating way to approach the question of the political that deviates in substantial aspects from common conceptions of politics in political science and political philosophy.¹ I will stay close to Rancière's wording so you can get a sense of his way of thinking.

Rancière makes a helpful distinction between what he refers to as "police" and as "politics", which for Rancière is always democratic politics (see Rancière, 1995; 2001; see Bingham and Biesta, 2010). He goes so far as to erase almost everything from his understanding of politics that we have allocated to that sphere for quite some time, i.e. "the actions of assemblies and parliaments, the decisions of courts, the work of politicians, all the efforts of bureaucrats" (cf. Chambers, 2011 pp.306). He finds

¹ Rancière's new way of thinking of politics has been influential in contemporary political theory as well as in the philosophy of education (Biesta, 2011), especially in the UK and Northern America. His conception opens up a number of interesting interfaces with democratic theory and educational issues, which I will not refer to in this presentation. However, it also needs to be mentioned that Rancière never wanted to offer a fully elaborated, all-encompassing theory of politics or "the political" (Chambers, 2011 p.318).

a new name for all these aspects and calls them “the police” or “the police order”. This concept of “the police” encompasses both the policy-making processes and the wide range of different cultural and economic arrangements. “Police” as the “symbolic constitution of the social” (Rancière, 2001 p.20) implies the invention of categories and the setting up of orders and limits. Thus, the “police order” arranges the social through the “dividing up and distribution of the various parts that make up the social whole” (Chambers, 2011). Thereby, this “partition of the sensible” as Rancière (2001 p.20) terms it, also defines which things can be done and how, how humans can be or exist and how they can say things.² And this “distribution of the sensible”, to use another original term, “is [also] a certain framing of time and space” (Rancière, 2011 p.7). Thus, Rancière calls it “the order of the sayable and the doable” (Rancière, 1999 p.29). For example, the “police order” defines social groups with regard to location or birth, it creates spaces, it gives shape to identities, it endows people with competencies so that they can feature as agents etc. While all this is taking place, the police-principle allows for participation, but also separates things and hence produces exclusion. It does not allow anything from the outside to be added or supplemented, because it defines what “there is” and also what “there is not”. In other words, there is nothing beyond the “police order” that could count and there is no void left for anything else to exist.

However, “the police” logic stands in total opposition to the logic of “politics”. According to Rancière, - I quote – “[p]olitics is first and foremost an intervention upon the visible and the sayable” (Rancière, 2001 p.21). So “politics” is not the process in which a dispute among actors with opposing positions ends with a decision made by the majority and legitimates what is to count from now on. And it is quite the opposite of a consensus based on a lowest common denominator. Quite contrary to this, at the heart of “politics” stands “the manifestation of dissensus” (Rancière, 2001). Dissensus here means a disturbance of the arrangements which make up the static practices of the police-principle.³ In other words, a set of practices which is driven by the assumption of equality tests and verifies the equality of every human being, redefining the predefined order of things. Thus, “political action (...) consists in blurring the boundaries” (Rancière, 2011 p.4).⁴ Therefore, “politics” allows something to be added to the given order as it works – I quote again – “at the meeting point of police logic and the

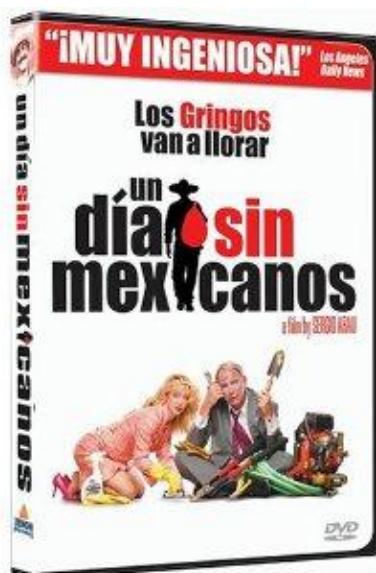
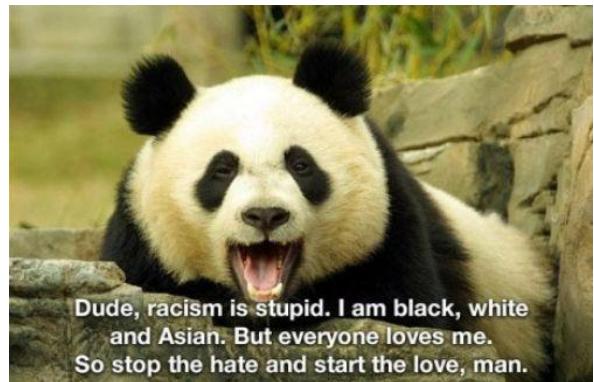
² “Policing involves configuring the common world as a stable distribution of places, identities, functions and competencies. The police order defines which places are inside and which are outside, which bodies are in the right place and which in the wrong one, which names fit those places and bodies and which do not. It is a logic of identification which wants everybody to be in his or her place, with the occupation suited to his or her place and the name fitting that occupation.” (Rancière, 2007 p.569)

³ Rancière’s understanding of the political does not start from the assumption that a political subject already has to be constituted before such a political struggle takes place. We do not need a historically pre-established collective subject such as the working class, women or illegalized people to do politics, nor any kind of avant-garde such as academics. Nor do we have to posit that such a political process is aimed at a good, “pure politics”(cf. Chambers, 2011).

⁴ To use an expression by McGahey, “[t]o Rancière, politics is the ground over which assertions of equality challenge established orders of classification, contesting configurations of the ‘police’” (McGahey, 2011 p.150).

logic of equality." (Rancière, 1999 p.62f).⁵ This "politics" has no specific place or sphere as in conceptions of a political sphere of public action and speech (Rancière, 2011 p.3). Rather, it must be understood as a dialectic process: – quote – "Politics 'takes place' in the space of the police by rephrasing and restaging social issues, police problems and so on." (Rancière, 2011 p.5) It insists that there is something beyond what is defined as sayable and doable that should count, although it is still unaccounted in the existing "police order". If this happens, then political struggle takes place. "Politics" is based on the supposition of equality when it names something as "wrong". This means that those who oppose the logic of the "police order" are not qualified or authorized to do so.⁶ At best, "politics" can transform spaces into something different.

For those of you who would like a concrete image of what Rancière might have in mind, just look at the following picture of the panda that has become popular in anti-racist campaigns. I stumbled upon it right on the corner of our office building in Mainz. As you can see, this image takes up existing notions of "black", "white" and "Asian". As it folds



them together a new perception appears – a positive connotation contained in the image of the beloved panda. This image takes the traditional fixed forms of social differentiation and hierarchical categorization to the absurd. Another aesthetic example of a void that is opened up in the existing "police order" is presented by the film "A Day Without a Mexican" (2004). Through the media of satire, this movie explores the impact of all the Mexicans in the state of California suddenly disappearing.

⁵ "Politics" occurs when the process of policing meets the process of equality. The process of equality consists "the open set of practices driven by the assumption of equality between any and every speaking being and by the concern to test this equality." (Rancière, 1999 p.30)

⁶ Thus, in this perspective equality is not a normative ideal or purpose. It is a precondition that exists when the police order is challenged. And thus, a political subject is not something that has to be defined before engaging in dissensus

What happens if we employ Rancière’s way of thinking about “the political” in social policy?

First, we can say that most of what is widely understood as social policy is part of the “police order”. Thus, entitlements to benefits, the regulation of so called “social” issues such as health, education, care and so on, as well as the social policy decisions that are taken by some governing body (e.g. an administrative, legislative or judicial body) mostly happen within this symbolic constitution of the sayable and doable. This is even true if one admits that some arrangements might have been made as a reaction to processes of “politics” and thus may already be invested with some sort of equality. Second, this kind of social policy “police order”, as I’d like to call it from now on, does not only constitute social institutions that are financed, run or regulated by the state. Even the practices of help and care within more “autonomous” social policy institutions, such as self-help groups, community-based services or help offered by religious groups, are made up by this symbolic constitution of the “police order”.

Third, to make something new be heard, seen and done in a way that goes beyond what is counted in the existing social policy “police order” needs to be disrupted and tested based on an assumption of equality.

Fourth, this dissensus can lead to a reshaping of arrangements in the governing of the social through social policy. At the end of the process, this possibly reconfigured social policy “police order” can allow for greater social inclusion, justice or welfare. But equally it can lead to completely opposite effects.

2. Implications for future research

How can we use this kind of approach as a heuristic tool to study transnational dynamics and interconnectedness in the field of social work?

First, for research on transnational social issues that is interested in taking up the actors’ point of view it would be quite illuminating to ask how the given social policy “police order” is symbolically and materially constructed in time and space and how it is enacted in everyday practice, e.g. within social service organizations. Especially with regard to transnational phenomena, qualitative approach of this type would look out for instances in which boundaries and corresponding frames of reference are made relevant or irrelevant, such as the nation-state and related categories. When I say “boundaries” I am not referring to the common notion of something almost naturally given, fixed and clear-cut as we normally think of borderlines that separate two clearly distinguishable territories. Instead, I am referring to the general understanding that the “social” is always made up through processes of differentiation and identification by naming and identifying one thing as different from another. Such

boundaries are often contested and have to be stabilized. Oftentimes boundaries are made up and maintained through the application of classifications, e.g. those set down in official or professional classification schemes. Applying or assigning classifications in this way can be understood as a political choice (Starr, 1995 p.273) and thus as an enactment of social policy or of the social policy "police order".

Second, taking into account the dominant role of the nation-state in the "rule of the social", especially in highly developed welfare arrangements, this perspective would be sensitive towards frictions and tensions between this dominant social policy "police order" and other forms of ordering in time and space that might become visible in the self-interpretation of people living in transnational "social worlds" (Strauss, 1993 pp.209-244; Clarke/Star, 2008). This idea is based on the assumption that a great number of social policy arrangements and related forms of regulation and social intervention do not adequately take into account the transnational dimensions in people's everyday life and related needs that call for social support (cf. Furman/Negi/Salvador, 2010; Negi/Furman, 2009; Su-Chen Hung/ Wen-Shan Yang/ Pei-Chih Yen 2010). It is no surprise that within such processes inconsistencies come up that have to be reconciled within existing classification schemes. Nevertheless, we also have to take into account the fact that administrative bodies, social service organizations or other support arrangements that are imbued with the social policy "police order" process people who live in transnational social worlds without allowing themselves to be bothered by possible inconsistencies. The question that arises here is: How is it possible for these organizations to maintain their perception about people's lives – e.g. conceptions about linear migration processes in contrast to trans-nationalized social worlds – even though they are confronted with different realities that do not easily fit in with their organizational design and knowledge base?

In close connection to this, what might be even more thrilling is, third, to watch out for moments of dissensus, e.g. those moments in which the existing logic of the "police" is challenged. To use Rancière's language, these are moments in which something yet unaccounted for is added to the existing order, or moments in which a void is opened up. We can look at those moments where existing boundaries and social categorizations are tested under the presumption of equality, which might lead to a reworking of these boundaries. To put it another way, we can focus on those situations in which boundary work takes place.

How can we apply this kind of approach towards "the political" in social policy to a concrete field of study in social work?

As I already indicated at the beginning and in line with my provisional ideas, this kind of perspective calls for a study of interactions and processes of ordering within social service organizations that provide direct support on a local or trans-local level. Thus, a study of this kind would scrutinize how

and why the transnational dimension within the everyday life of some people can emerge – and equally how and why this transnational dimension cannot emerge. Starting from the assumption that a great deal of knowledge and related processes in service provision are closely linked to national frames of reference, it can be assumed that the transnational realities in people's life literally "provoke" the existing boundary work and categorization processes. Similarly we can imagine that there are a lot of processes going on within such organizations that are intended to "silence" or "hide" these transnational realities.

To make this clear I'd like to take up some thought from a small but notable conference on transnational knowledge at the University of Mainz. Some of us had the chance to listen to the presentation of empirical studies featuring the everyday boundary work and translational accomplishments of ordinary people living some sort of transnational life. For example, some studies focused on the production and transfer of knowledge as a resource for people allowing them to shape their life actively and to cope with problematic situations.⁷ In the context of this conference, knowledge was understood in a relational manner as something that always refers to specific frames of reference, i.e. times, places and social groups (e.g. an ethnic group or a national society). These frameworks also define the borders of knowledge and its validity. As we know, in transnational processes people draw on multiple frames of reference by spanning localities based in two or more nation states. This leads to the production of differences and distinctions (e.g. between a "here" and "there", a "now" and "then"). But it can also amount to a connection and communication of different stocks of knowledge which then might flow into something new, e.g. a new form of "trans"-knowing or "trans"-meaning. If this happens, then knowledge bound to one frame of reference has to be transferred and adapted to new contexts, too. In such processes multiple boundaries and frames of reference have to be negotiated and meanings have to be interwoven.

What follows from this?

To put it short, a great deal of research in our academic work focuses on this everyday boundary work and translational accomplishment in the "private", everyday life worlds of people living some sort of transnational life. But what happens if these transnational everyday life worlds come up against intermediary or professional forms of social help, e.g. in local social services offering family support or any kind of social assistance, such as in women's shelters, in migration agencies or in psycho-social counseling? We still know very little about the mediations and translations of knowledge

⁷ You might remember the example of a temporary migratory worker travelling between Germany and Moldavia, presented by Tina Hollstein. Or think of the case of an African woman establishing a small-scale business in African hair styles, introduced by Caroline Schmitt. Another example is the case of a Brazilian migrant organization (Duscha, 2012).

and meaning that are necessary or that actually take place when this happens. What happens, for example, when transnational family arrangements or family care on the one hand meets social services aiming at preventing or solving problems? Can the actors' transnational knowledge surface within their interactions in intermediary or professional support contexts, e.g. when "clients" meet frontline workers and street-level bureaucrats? Or can such transnational knowledge even be produced in these situations? If this is possible, what happens after such an interactional accomplishment, for example when this knowledge has to be processed beyond the original situation within the organization, or when it becomes relevant in coordination processes between different organizations?

These questions have still not been answered, at least not to my knowledge. Nevertheless, we can assume that the heart of social service organizations is based on the assignment of people, their problems etc. to a previously established classificatory system. And this work is often done by intermediary agents, such as social service providers who apply classification rules to cases. We can further suppose that social workers play a dominant role in the definition and processing of cases. Although we do not know for sure, it can be assumed that there is a kind of mismatch between people's transnational realities, including their transnational support systems, and the way these realities are perceived in traditional institutions of social policy and social intervention that are still closely bound to the national or local context or to some sort of supranational arrangements. It can be supposed that this leads to overt or hidden strains and tensions, as competing agendas of concern meet and need to be negotiated and reconciled. To put it another way, these tensions can be imagined as inconsistencies that come up and have to be reconciled within working classification schemes. This might be even truer for people with precarious immigration status (for Canada see: Goldring/Berinstein/Bernhard, 2009). "Precarious status" means that the people who fall under this label are deprived of full status and rights. They do not have entitlements to some welfare benefits and they do not have access to significant social participation. People who fit the label "precarious status" can thus be understood as strangers who produce categorical problems.⁸ Can we imagine that their transnational knowledge and their mediational qualities between different frames of reference might lead to something like "politics" and thus become visible in social services in the sense supported by Rancière? Do processes of equality take place within these professional support structures, that is statements of dissensus set against the social policy "police order" "driven by the assumption of equality between any and every speaking being and by the concern to test this equality[?]" (Rancière, 1999 p.30) And if "politics" is not possible, how can that be?

⁸ See therefore Susan L. Star: "Strangers are those who come and stay a while, long enough so that membership becomes a troublesome issue -- they are not just nomads passing through, but people who sort of belong and sort of don't." (Bowker/Star, 1999 p.302)

I am still not fully convinced that this is a fruitful approach towards "the political" in the social services and other social support arrangements. And in a practical sense it might not be easy to identify whether or not the social policy "police order" is being disturbed in this way. This is based on the assumption that politics have no special sphere and arise in moments which are difficult to spot in advance, as Rancière tells us.⁹ Nevertheless I think that such disturbances and redistributions of the sensible can be reconstructed on an interactional and organizational level. For example, we might look at the categories that are employed to define identities, spaces, times, etc. and to make things fit into the existing processes of ordering. I will not go into this deeply but just mention that studies in the field of scientific knowledge and Science and Technology Studies can offer us a number of sensitizing concepts as tools that can be used and adapted to an empirical endeavor of this type (cf. A. Clarke/Star, 2008). Here I would just like to name Susan L. Star and colleagues closely linked to the study of boundary objects and boundary work.¹⁰

3. Résumé

This presentation was motivated by the assumption that up to now the transnational dimension of people living some sort of transnational everyday life is poorly reflected within the work of intermediary or professional forms of social support, e.g. in social services and related forms of social intervention. Correspondingly, scientific research still has scant knowledge of what happens if transnational everyday life worlds meet social services. The argument pushed forward here is that such encounters and related processes should be seen as sites or arenas in which social policy is enacted and enlivened in interactions which often take place within organizations and in between them. It was stated that the transnational aspects of people's life are oftentimes hidden and invisible – or, to put it more clearly, they are made invisible and they are silenced, because they cannot appear within the working "order of the visible and sayable" (Rancière 1999, p.29). I supposed that this could be very much the case for those people fitting the label "precarious immigration status" when they meet social services and similar professional support arrangements. They do not fit easily in the "national" framework of social work and related forms of knowing and organizing things because as "strangers" they produce categorical problems. Therefore the question has to be asked: How is it that professional support arrangements such as social service organizations do not allow themselves to be

⁹ In Rancière's sense, "politics" only occurs "as a provisional accident in the history of the forms of domination" (Rancière, 2001 p.18). "Politics" is something temporary in which political subjects can appear in a rather volatile and fluid manner, which nevertheless amounts to a history of politics. Rancière tells us that "[a] political subject is not a group of interests or ideas: It is the operator of a particular mode of subjectification and litigation through which politics has its existence." (Rancière, 2001 p.25)

¹⁰ Following the work of Susan Star, boundary objects can be conceived as "interfaces facilitating knowledge production" (Lamont/ Molnár, 2002 p.180). They are part of social classification processes that order human interaction, though many aspects of these accomplishments often remain themselves invisible. Especially when naturalized classification systems bump against each other and problematics arise, sets of boundary objects emerge immediately to allow divergent viewpoints to be managed (Bowker/ Star, 1999).

bothered by people's transnational lives? Nevertheless, we also should allow ourselves to be surprised if such a thing happens, and then ask: How are these potential ruptures and disturbances within the given social policy "police order" possible? This seems important to me because it offers a way to think about a reshaping of the dominant symbolic constitution of the "social" towards more justice and equality than can possibly be achieved through the potential emergence of "politics".

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