

THE DOMESTICATION OF WORLDWIDE POLICY MODELS

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This paper discusses the implementation of exogenous policy models by nation-states in the light of the domestication framework. It is concluded that a nation-state can be considered as a local place, or even as some kind of machine that produces contexts for people's activities. With its standardised practices the nation-state tends to homogenise different neighbourhoods and make them translocal. However, the isomorphic development of separate nation-states does not mean that all national features are gradually disappearing from the world. Cultural differences are continuously produced and reproduced in the social processes triggered by individuals and social groups negotiating changing contexts, whether the changes are due to the world market, adaptive policy models or any other intervention.

Keywords: worldwide policy models, domestication, nation-state, translocal, interstate system

In my current research project we address the question of how we can account for uniform changes in most advanced market economies, for instance the recent neoliberal reforms. That is both an enigma and an object of debate within the social sciences and in public discussion. Yet how we perceive isomorphic development is important. If the explanations portray social changes as inevitable and political reforms as having no alternatives, they contribute to a depoliticisation of politics.

In the research project we approach global social change from the viewpoint of nation states: how they implement exogenous policy models. Our aim is to acquire a better understanding of how nation-states, as formal sovereign actors, adopt them and thereby create isomorphic developmental trends. For instance, how are exogenous models justified in

public texts so that policy makers acquire the support of the majority of voters behind them? To tackle these questions we apply the concept of domestication to global governance. In this paper I discuss the theoretical and conceptual problems faced in this undertaking. By way of conclusion, I address the question of whether isomorphic changes throughout the world gradually eradicate regional and cultural differences.

The Domestication Framework

The concept of domestication originates from anthropology and consumption studies, and most recently has been used in the study of information and communication technologies (ICT) (e.g. Silverstone 1994; Silverstone & Hirsch 1992; Silverstone et al. 1991). This framework stresses that domestication

involves more than simply bringing new machines or software home. Instead, the process of “taming” new technology, making it part of routine practices, has an effect on the symbolic and material status of the new elements. That is why domestication studies make sense of the meeting of old routines and new technology by relating the potential of technology to the context of its use and to its determination by forces in the widest political, social and cultural environment (Silverstone 1993: 307). In this framework, those who weave these new elements into their existing practices are thus seen as active and creative agents, albeit within certain external conditions (Morley & Silverstone 1990: 34). Furthermore, it is emphasised that the end result of the process of domestication is that the place of a domesticated animal becomes so familiar to the actors involved that it is no longer seen as something external or strange. Rather, it is considered as natural or, indeed, domestic. For instance, domesticated technology “disappears” as a technology in everyday language (Anderson 2002).

Although the concept of domestication stems from elsewhere, it is intuitively useful when thinking about the creation and harmonisation of global trends. This is more or less the same as the concept of (re)territorialisation (e.g. Brenner 1999b), but in addition to conveying the idea of reconfiguration and re-scaling of forms of territorial organisation such as cities and states, domestication also refers to the naturalisation of its outcomes among the local population. The framework stresses that external models are never just adopted; when turned into actual practices and incorporated with local conditions their meaning and consequences are different from the original blueprint. Secondly, the concept stresses and focuses on the role of local actors in adapting to global trends. Such an emphasis hits the nail on the head because sovereign nation-states seldom act in direct response to external pressures. Even when a nation-state is forced to comply with a policy change, perhaps for economic reasons, compliance is often presented as a voluntary move and adapted to local conditions in order to save face. Thirdly, apprehending the adoption of exogenous models as a

process of domestication leads to the consideration of a reform in terms of domestic frames of sense-making – a process that leads to familiarisation, so that the exogenous links of the domestic changes are forgotten.

Yet there are also problems related to the use of domestication in this context. For instance, if domestication is the only angle from which global harmonisation of social change is perceived, it tends to reproduce the global–local dichotomy and the image of isomorphic development as caused by influences that come from outside a country or local community and to which they simply adapt. Related to such an image, isomorphic development is easily translated into the assumption according to which powerful countries or other global players lead the way and others follow suit. Thus, even though I think domestication is a useful concept, it has to be complemented with perspectives that are sensitive to the ways in which local actors advertise their innovations to other countries and to the international community. In addition, when applying the concept of domestication we need to question the meaning of place and space.

What is the Domus?

When studying the domestication of new technologies, it is common to use an individual or a household as the site – the domus – within which an appliance or innovation is domesticated. When discussing worldwide policy models we need to consider whether using nation-states as the spaces within which domestication takes place is useful or self-evident.

When studying the domestication of exogenous models in a nation-state context, we should avoid the “territorial trap” (Agnew 1994), methodological nationalism (Chernilo 2006) or state-centrism (Brenner 1999a; Taylor 1996), within which the state is viewed as the self-evident container of society, while the world system is mapped in terms of a distinction between “domestic” politics and “foreign” relations (Brenner 1999a: 46). Instead, our analysis of the domestication of supranational policy models is meant as a critique of state-centric epistemology. We

conceive of the modern interstate system as a historically unique territorial structure rather than as a natural precondition of social and political existence. Instead of assuming the naturalness of the territorial state, we study how the domestication of exogenous models works as an institutional interface between sub- and supra-national scales and how it contributes to the naturalisation of the nation-state and national frames of sense-making.

Referring to the regional state as a *domus* – the space or place into which supranational models are domesticated – also warrants brief discussion. Here it is important to stress that “space itself may be primordially given, but the organization, use, and meaning of space is a product of social translation, transformation and experience” (Soja 1980: 210). The same can be said about local places or neighbourhoods. This is how Arjun Appadurai discusses them:

Neighborhoods both are contexts and at the same time require and produce contexts. Neighborhoods are contexts in the sense that they provide the frame or setting within which various kinds of human action (productive, reproductive, interpretive, performative) can be initiated and conducted meaningfully. Because meaningful life-worlds require legible and reproducible patterns of action, they are text-like and thus require one or many contexts. From another point of view, a neighborhood is a context, or a set of contexts, within which meaningful social action can be both generated and interpreted. In this sense, neighborhoods are contexts, and contexts are neighborhoods. A neighborhood is a multiplex interpretive site (Appadurai 1996: 184).

The question is whether a nation-state can be considered as a local context; a territorially defined area that provides a context for people's practices. According to Appadurai's train of thought, nation-states can well be considered as such contexts, or even as some kind of machine that produces contexts for people's activities. Compared with people living in a neighbourhood, nation-states are much more powerful as context-producers: “Through ap-

paratuses as diverse as museums and village dispensaries, post offices and police stations, tollbooths and telephone booths, the nation-state creates a vast network of formal and informal techniques for the nationalization of all space considered to be under its sovereign authority” (1996: 189). In addition, the territorial state typically draws the borders of a public sphere, composed of the national media, which forms and reproduces national frames of sense-making. In this respect the nation-state is also a virtual community, even though its borders become increasingly porous due to global media and information and communication technology. However, as members of the “imagined community” (Anderson 1991) of a nation-state, people not only share the topics covered by the media but also have an interest in some of them, because it means that they have some kind of impact on the national politics that shape their quotidian life.

Thus, although the nation-state can hardly be considered as a single place, with its standardised practices it tends to homogenise different neighbourhoods and make them translocal. Such translocal places do not even need to be in geographical proximity to other neighbourhoods in which the same routine practices apply, which can easily be realised when thinking about the “starbuckization” (Ritzer 2008; Thompson & Zeynep 2004) of tourist resorts for Westerners or U.S. army camps in different corners of the world. From the viewpoint of people's everyday lives, the nationally homogenised territorial state, intertwined with the effects of global but primarily “Western” companies and brands, provides a life-world in which people can habitually rely on a number of expectations about others' actions. Therefore, it is also relevant to study the domestication of policy models in the context of nation-states, or particular areas such as municipalities within them. This means concentrating on studying the process through which existing routines within the territorial state are challenged by suggesting new models, as well as how those models, adjusted into (trans)local conditions, are realised as actual practices, so that they also eventually become a self-evident part of the local “house rules”.

The Nation-State as a Translocal Place

Considering the isomorphic development of separate nation-states from the vantage point of the domestication of worldwide models may create the impression that all national features are gradually disappearing from the world, and all that is left is a complete convergence of world cultures into a single, though perhaps hybrid, world culture. Against this somewhat bleak prospect, many theoretical strands look for pockets of resistance, for instance in vibrant national cultures or in local neighbourhoods. However, the framing of the question as to whether world cultures are becoming increasingly homogenous or hybrid (e.g. Appadurai 1996; Ritzer 1996; Stoddard & Cornwell 1999; Thussu 1998) is somewhat ill-conceived, and based on a state-centric epistemology that has underpinned significant strands of human sciences (Brenner 1999a: 46), not to mention the global public imaginary within which we think about the life of humans on this planet.

The problem with the framing of that question is that it presupposes a unique, original national or local culture, which is then gradually diluted by exogenous influences until nothing original is left. Instead, we have to realise that the whole idea of the nation-state is a worldwide cosmopolitan model that was turned into reality and "institutionalized in the Treaty of Westphalia of 1648, which recognized the existence of an interstate system composed of contiguous, bounded territories ruled by sovereign states" (Brenner 1999a: 47). According to this institutional arrangement, all habitable areas of the globe are divided into territorial states that are not simply restricted to border controls and military defences. Instead, the interstate system comprises a plethora of worldwide models according to which nation-states are organised. These models comprise ideals like equality and freedom of speech, as well as institutions like governments and educational systems. As a whole, the world polity is composed of formally independent units, often referred to as nation-states, which, put together from essentially the same elements, appear to replicate each other. For instance, every nation that is officially recognised by the United Nations has a flag and a national anthem

that represents the nineteenth and twentieth century European musical tradition. Moreover, within this institutional framework, human beings, as citizens of a country, are conceived of in the same categories. As Meyer and colleagues put it, if an unknown society was "discovered" on a previously unknown island, one of the changes that would occur would be that "the population would be counted and classified in ways specified by world census models" (Meyer et al. 1997: 145–146).

This nation-state imaginary is hard to resist. It also captures the minds of minority groups that resist the order within a nation-state because they either do not want to be, or are not accepted as, part of the nation. Consequently, they are typically organised into a separatist movement that demands or longs for its own state (e.g. Gow 2004). Or to put it the other way around, creating a separatist movement within this global institutional system presupposes that one invents an "ethnic" culture. In the case of existing territorial states, the hyphen between state and nation implies that the nation has to be constructed and its cultural history written.

In this sense, the fact that the same new supra-national policy models are continuously introduced into separate nation-states does not mean that these countries become less and less unique because the models behind the existing practices are no longer autochthonous. Rather than asking what happens to indigenous cultures in this process, it is more interesting to ask how and why different nation-state government actors, or individuals working in different occupations or perhaps taking part in an international organisation, compare each others' practices, adopt and promote them as worldwide models, and follow the same trends. Actors certainly have utilitarian reasons for this; without conforming to international standards and without adopting models that seem to give a competitive edge, nation-states suffer in global competition. However, underlying these motives is the fact that the world models comprising the interstate system also constitute actors and their identities. The world polity has been able to universalise the rational actor as the identity that states, organisations and individuals assume, which

means that policy models legitimated by rationality and scientific research consequently appeal to them (Meyer 2000). In other words, we are all much more cosmopolitan than we may think, and that is because many constitutive categories of our thinking and institutional contexts of our quotidian life in nation-states are translocal.

Do Cultural Differences Exist?

Although we live our daily lives in doubly translocal conditions, i.e. in neighbourhoods under the nationalised pressures of the nation-state and in territorial states created according to worldwide models, it does not mean that people's daily practices are the same throughout the world. While there is indeed a multiplicity of different lifestyles and modes of thought, this is not because indigenous cultures have been able to resist the global pressures of homogenisation. Why, then, are people's daily practices so different?

John Meyer (2000) suggests that the uniqueness of national cultures is expressed in "expressive culture" in areas that are irrelevant from the viewpoint of "instrumental culture", i.e. from the perspective of rational action. According to him, nation-states do not want to be too unique in, for instance, their divisions of labour, forms of state structure, or educational or medical systems. Instead:

Uniqueness and identity are thus most legitimately focused on matters of expressive culture: variations in language, dress, food, traditions, landscapes, familial styles and so on. These are precisely the things that in the modern system do not matter, which is to say they have no direct, rational relation to instrumental actorhood. Nation-states and organized ethnic groups within them do not claim to have their own styles of wife- or child-bearing, of economic production and so on. Such claims would violate global principles and pressures, and actual traditions along these lines are suppressed in reconstructions or revitalizations of history and tradition (Meyer 2000: 245).

Meyer certainly has a point here: worldwide models that can be justified by science and rational-

ity spread more easily. Yet his analytical distinction between instrumental and expressive culture is problematic. What about the fact that practically all nation-states want to express that they belong to the civilised world by establishing the classical European art institutions of opera, ballet and classical music (Adams 1999)? Nowadays it seems that a well-developed popular culture scene has also become a must, and not only for utilitarian reasons. Consider, too, the trends in fashion, art and design that sweep the world. They can also be considered worldwide models. Besides, global trends in public policies, management or corporate governance are not so qualitatively different from the world of fashion.

Instead of explaining regional and cultural differences by those aspects of society that have no rational relation to instrumental actorhood, it may be more appropriate to suggest that they are due to complex human interactions in different geographical settings within which life-worlds take their continuously changing shape. When, for instance, new supranational policy models are introduced within a nation-state, the eventual changes made in the legislation and actual changes in existing practices and procedures are always outcomes of national political skirmishes and compromises between different parties and other powerful agents. For instance, in a case analysis we showed that Finland's top-ranking results in the recent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study, led by the OECD, were used differently by different agents. The Ministry of Education used them to argue that existing practices in national comprehensive schooling should not be altered (Rautalin & Alasuutari, forthcoming), whereas the Finnish teachers' union used low unit costs in education as grounds for demanding more resources for basic education (Rautalin & Alasuutari 2007).

To conclude, rather than a disappearing residue of age-old traditions, cultural differences are continuously produced and reproduced in the social processes triggered by individuals and social groups negotiating changing contexts, whether the changes are due to the world market, adaptive policy models or any other intervention. In this sense, the domes-

tication of worldwide models may increase rather than decrease regional differences, although it also contributes to harmonising social change in different nation-states.

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