
Book Review

Elzbieta Drazkiewicz (2020) *Institutionalised dreams: The art of managing foreign aid*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn. 248 pages.

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Since Mauss' classic work on the gift, social scientists and in particular anthropologists have been aware that giving and receiving are deeply interconnected with power relations and the social construction of identities and categorisations. Boundaries and hierarchies are continuously created, altered and reshaped not only between givers and receivers, but also between those who receive and those who do not, despite their needs (the deserving and undeserving needy), as well as among those who give and those who do not do so. Critical approaches to giving, however, be it in the scholarly subfields dealing with charity, philanthropy, humanitarianism or development, tend to focus on the first aspect within this larger phenomenon—that is on power relations between donors and recipients. Many leave aside other aspects such as the stakes and processes of becoming a donor, or the socio-historical processes of selecting the needy to support and the establishment of donor-recipient attachments.

Development ethnographies, in particular, often focus on concrete projects, on their everyday operation and the life of development workers on the site of development, rarely extending beyond these limits, and leaving in the shadow major sites of knowledge production related to these projects. Firstly, the life-world of recipients of aid remains unseen due to epistemic limitations of aid projects. As the latter often disregard local perspectives, such epistemic limitations may easily become reflected in the limited horizon of anthropological accounts, too. Secondly, the social construction of development discourses, norms, values, categorisations, and identities of donors may also become veiled, not independently of the interest of donors to naturalise the latter as universal, objective, and thus unquestionable. By highlighting the case of foreign aid in Poland, Elzbieta Drazkiewicz's book, *Institutionalised dreams: The art of managing foreign aid* greatly contributes to exploring this second phenomenon. It reconstructs how foreign aid actors manoeuvre among historically evolving ideologies and economic, political, legal and cultural institutions, and how various levels and scales—global, European, individual and national—become intimately intertwined in the ongoing process of assembling Polish foreign aid.

A core move of the book is to embed this process into a European landscape of power built upon the discourse of modernisation that positions Central and Eastern European countries as lagging behind and in need of development *vis-à-vis* Western European countries, not only along economic characteristics, but also politically and culturally. Such discourse implies that 'Eastern' actors struggle for better positions along the modernisation hierarchy, and it also legitimates a disciplinary regard on the part of highly positioned ('developed' and 'civilised') Western actors over lower positioned ('less developed' and 'less civilised') Eastern ones.

While this discourse on the 'East–West slope' of modernisation (Melegh, 2006) as a totalising ideology appears in almost every domain of the social world, Drażkiewicz thoroughly explores its operation in the specific process of assembling Polish foreign aid during the last four decades. Firstly, becoming a recipient of Western foreign aid, due to the debt crisis of the 80s and later economic and social deterioration in Poland following post-transition market liberalisation (and related processes of privatisation, austerity measures and rising unemployment), positioned Poland as a poor and underdeveloped country compared to Western states. Such position, in turn, incited the urge to overcome the 'recipient' stigma by shifting roles, and becoming a 'donor'. According to a central statement of the book, Polish foreign aid is deeply anchored to the self-positioning of Poland as a donor country, aspiring to become 'developed' by lining up alongside illustrious development actors of the West. Secondly, Drażkiewicz shows that becoming a donor was motivated not only by the wish to eliminate the denigrating role of the aid recipient, but it was also implied by Western expectations. The discourse of modernisation, dominating the EU enlargement process and also the Polish accession, not only set up value hierarchies among European states and nations, but also legitimated a general disciplinary relationship allowing 'developed' Western actors to tutor Eastern ones in the political, legal, or economic fields. Under the label of helping postsocialist CEE countries to 'catch up with' and to 'return to Europe,' such tutoring aimed the enhancement of values of economic and political liberalism in these countries (this process was compellingly dubbed by Dace Dzenovska the 'School of Europeanness,' see Dzenovska, 2018). Among numerous other domains it also involved expectations to participate in international aid and development.

A central pillar of the power complex of the discourse of modernisation and, within it, of international development is the assumption of Western development endeavours being universalistic, rational, and ultimately neutral (a-political). Such characteristics rendering immense symbolic–disciplinary–power to the 'Western' way of international development are explored and dismantled in the book. Firstly, through the example of Polish foreign aid, *Institutionalised dreams* shows how diverse ideologies are brought together in various phases and configurations, national and religious particularistic as well as universalistic ones. This analytical reassembling of Polish foreign aid as based upon diversely interconnected ideologies, however, is not intended to demonstrate the peculiarity and exotic character of Polish development. On the contrary, it proposes a generalisable analytical model relevant for all types, including those (self)represented as universal. As the author formulates it: 'Development aid is not a culturally neutral phenomenon and in every case it is rooted in specific historical and contemporary political context. It is a reflection of country-specific domestic cultures of charity and moral economies; it resonates with the ways in which states and societies see themselves in the world, and construct their

national identity' (p. 60). Secondly, besides exposing how national institutions and particularistic ideologies relevant in various domestic contexts may play an essential role in creating foreign aid, the limits of rationality and universality are displayed at the level of formal procedures. Numerous Western but also local Polish actors interested in the promotion of international aid attempt to educate politicians, stakeholders, everyday people, as well as institutional practices to comply with 'proper' Western models of international development. These disciplinary attempts are shown in *Institutionalised dreams* as normative and prescriptive, eluding the scripts of rational argumentation of equal parties.

The majority of chapters and subchapters of the book illustrate these claims. Chapter 2 and 4 show how pre-existing ideological and institutional frameworks of various types of helping relevant in the domestic Polish context have been used to manufacture foreign aid for Poland, while Chapter 3, 6, and 7 focus on the operation of the East–West modernisation discourse. First, state and private voluntary aid initiated in the early 90s to support ethnic Polish communities living in post-Soviet states have been widened in the mid-2000s in their scope to include not only ethnic Poles, but entire countries to the east of Poland, such as Belarus, Ukraine or Kazakhstan. The concept of a pan-Slavic culture, the common experience of socialism, Eastern European identities, or common histories uniting territories in current-day distinct states (e.g. the Kresy) all became building blocks of a 'cultural proximity' narrative that legitimated Polish responsibilities to help these countries. Historical power struggles, conflicts and oppressions in the histories of these nations and states were shaded away by the implicitly assumed common enemy—Russian imperialism. Historical narratives of fighting for Polish national sovereignty in the last few centuries and personal and collective memories of the Solidarity movement of the 80s have resonated well with the experience of being the target of Western democracy promotion since the end of the 80s. This allowed the creation of a self-narrative of the Polish nation as an authentic and competent candidate to further enlarge Western efforts of promoting democracy towards the East, and more precisely to post-Soviet states and Russia. Chapter 2, 'To the West through the East and back,' convincingly argues that these narratives of cultural proximity and common experience of socialism and transition connected Poland with numerous Eastern European states, and activities of democracy promotion allowed Polish politicians and civic actors to give content to their new donor duties assigned to them in the EU enlargement process.

Ironically, despite the articulate presence of democracy promotion carried out by Western states and NGOs in Eastern Europe and in Poland (see Dzenovska, 2018), the reproduction of such discourses and activities by the Polish state and NGOs in post-Soviet states did not qualify in the eyes of Western and international actors as 'proper' international humanitarian and development aid. Such democracy promotion implied for Poland the inferior position of the 'emerging donor' *vis-à-vis* Western actors, and of one who is reluctant and incompetent, in further need of disciplining. The reconfiguration of Polish aid into 'proper' aid that is targeting Africa instead of Eastern Europe, and pursuing economic instead of political development, is described in Chapter 3, 'Global education: Discovering Africa for Polish aid.'

While aid for Eastern European states was legitimized by canonical national historical narratives and collective memories of the past, Drażkiewicz claims that, in the case of Africa, these historical narratives were not easily available. Past experience, narratives

and ideologies connecting the African continent with Poland, such as international aid and exchange in the Comecon framework with specific African states, Polish colonisation efforts, or Polish Catholic missionary work in Africa were deemed illegitimate and inappropriate from the perspective of post-transition hegemonic Western ideologies of development and modernisation. Chapter 3 describes the immense work carried out to make up for this ideological gap in order to connect Poland with the African continent, in a way that incites compassion and urges Poland to take responsibility and to help. This chapter shows how ideologies of 'global education' were evoked in the early 2000s among Polish actors interested in foreign aid. Historical narratives were created, pointing out journeys of Polish historical personalities in Africa. Also, sensory experience and emotions were staged and evoked by means of cultural events and exhibitions, all these with the aim of connecting Poland and Africa in the hearts and minds of citizens (often pupils and students), politicians, and other stakeholders. The author emphasizes the role of intellectual traditions of Polish nation-building through education and cooperative self-help activism in the 19th century as historically created dispositions behind such pedagogic efforts directed towards Poles 'ignorant' and 'uneducated' regarding 'Africa' (p. 89). The chapter also points to a major inherent paradox of humanitarianism and development, described by many: manufacturing attachments and connectivity going hand in hand with creating Otherness and hierarchies between the needy and underdeveloped recipient and the generous and developed donor.

Chapter 4, 'The moral economy of foreign aid: Religion and institutions,' explores yet another institutional framework that shaped the form and content of contemporary foreign aid in Poland. The chapter explains how Polish missionaries' work in Africa, starting from the early 90s provided, incubated and, through the influential role of the Catholic Church in the media and in education, disseminated ideological frameworks and narratives linking Poland to African lifeworlds. It also shows how missionary networks and related organisations, infrastructures, and 'local knowledge' became convenient building blocks in the practical construction of Polish aid in Africa.

According to this chapter, the traditional model of religious charity of the Polish Catholic church resonates well with the 'phenomenology' of African aid: both are characterised by depoliticised pleas for empathy and compassion, the goal of helping innocent and deserving passive victims, saving them from dehistoricised forms of poverty, and with the help of self-sacrificing workers and donors. While the author emphasizes that such analogies, and the role of religious institutions and organisations are not specific to the Polish context, the chapter succeeds in demonstrating that the pressures to hide this relationship between religion/the church and foreign aid, and to render it invisible could well differ between 'Western' and 'Eastern' cases. The stakes of becoming 'modern' and climbing up the modernisation hierarchy burdens the latter much more: becoming a 'proper' donor urges the concealment of ties of Polish foreign aid in Africa to the church that is, to a social institution considered to stand in opposition to modernity (as well as secularisation and rationalisation). This inclination may become even more acute in the Polish case, since Polish national identities and national discourses are more deeply connected to Catholicism—and carry the threat of its non-modern connotations—compared to other Central and Eastern European societies.

Chapter 5, 'The mission,' turns to the level of individual motivations of aid workers.

It shows the role of personal desires, ambitions, and dispositions behind more impersonal institutional discourses of aid and development. It shows how the desire for authenticity and the authentic Other, and individual ambitions for leadership and self-realisation become intimately entangled with a constant urge at the organisational-institutional level to enlarge and expand, to constantly discover broader and broader geographical regions for development activities.

Chapter 6, 'Vocation, profession or private enterprise?', explores the presence of various institutional narratives and metaphors in the everyday operation of development aid. First, staging and performing development work as personal calling, emotional dedication, and an overall subordination of the private and the personal for the greater cause of the 'mission' is alternated with the vision of development work as the site of rationality, professionalism, expertise, and bureaucratic discipline. The chapter shows how these two models of action are strategically used to mobilise various resources, and how this 'manoeuvring' depends on the situations, interactions of involved participants, and their interests, needs, and available resources. While the 'missionary' mode allows for mobilising public support of private donors and the public in Poland, as well as the control over the personal emotional resources of workers, the 'professional development' framework promises to live up to expectations of more established 'Western' aid actors, and the mobilisation of their material and financial, as well as symbolic support. The author analytically connects the coexistence and strategic use of these alternative frameworks to complement scholarly ideas that conceive of these two modes of development as a process of institutionalisation. At the same time, the reader may also think about possible links of this coexistence, and the role of the 'mission' mode in particular, to the recently growing presence of the 'private' and the 'emotional' in various organisational contexts, described in scholarly literature as 'affective governance' (Muehlebach, 2012).

After two chapters describing individual motivation frameworks and institutional legitimising narratives relevant in the everyday on-site operation of development projects, the last chapter, 'The system: Hope for a better future,' brings into the focus the level of governmental policymaking and legislation. It shows how paradoxical characteristics of development described in other settings and context, such as critical capacities and activism emerging in bureaucratic contexts, or the perpetual aspirations to mend insufficient policies unfold also in the case of Polish foreign aid. Moreover, and in line with the core insight of the book, it is also revealed how such processes become relegated, again, to the ideological framework of East-West modernisation discourse and, more specifically, to Western actors' disciplinary perspectives and practices as well as the ambitions of the East to 'catch up'.

In her seminal book on post-accession social transformations in Latvia, Dace Dzenovska has shown how various institutional processes, such as transformations of Latvian minority politics, or migration and border control reveal inherent paradoxes of the ideological foundations of Europe, comprising tensions between aspirations for universality and humanity, and particularistic exclusions and hierarchies. Drażkiewicz's fascinating book corroborates this claim with evidence from the specific terrain of Polish foreign aid.

Institutionalised dreams reveals how Western development discourses, despite their alleged rationality and affinity for critical thinking, operate with implicit and unquestionable hierarchies, selections and exclusions. Specific concepts, practices, and actors become

subordinated or even excluded from the approved and desirable repertoire of development not by rational argumentation, but by erasure, forgetting and delegitimation. Forgetting Comecon past and related development cooperation; delegitimizing religious practices, ideologies, institutions; delegitimizing the support of the national Polish diaspora, or of democratisation projects in CEE as improper foreign aid imply the secondary, subordinate position of Poland as an 'ignorant' 'emerging donor' *vis-à-vis* 'established', 'old' Western ones. Furthermore, all these erasures contribute to excluding specific aid practices and numerous target groups and potential recipients from the scope of Polish international development. Related to the role of particularistic ideologies in assembling foreign aid, *Institutionalised dreams* also provides an invaluable contribution to understanding the working of national ideologies in particular, and its intricate relation to universalising models of aid and humanitarianism. It shows three ways of such ideologies and institutions becoming building blocks in constructing the positions of the needy and of those capable of and responsible for helping them. It demonstrates the role of national ideologies and institutions in constructing attachments, solidarity, and belonging between these positions. First, as in the case of aid targeted to the Polish diaspora, nationhood may become relevant as the basis of supporting those perceived as same in national or cultural terms. Second, it is shown how such aid built on national similarity may become enlarged and transformed to cover wider groups of recipients, and absorb universalising ideologies of aid. Third, in the context of international development and humanitarianism the book reveals how nationhood and national categorisations may provide an ideological framework upon which the universalising contest for modernity and civilisation is projected (Zakariás & Feischmidt, 2020). Besides the role of national ideologies and institutions in constructing aid, *Institutionalised dreams* also shows that nationhood, ideologies, and institutions are not only background elements in the assemblage of aid, but are themselves outcomes of aid practices: they become altered, shaped and reconstructed in promoting, planning, and implementing foreign aid.

All these compelling results are derived from an enormous scope of empirical resources. Participant observation carried out in a specific aid project in Poland and South Sudan, and as government intern in Warsaw, a great number of interviews conducted among diverse actors in development NGOs and in related state and church institutions, and the analysis of media and policy documents are brought together in assembling this fascinating jigsaw puzzle of Polish foreign aid. Specific blind spots yet provide possibilities for further research. As the book presents how aid actors manoeuvre between Western aid discourses and domestic ideologies and institutions relevant in Poland, it is striking for the reader to notice the extent to which recipient perspectives in South Sudan were left out from such analysis. While this may be implied, as the author claims, in great part, by the severe limitations of recipients' participation and empowerment in development projects in general, a possible way forward could be to enlarge the scope of inquiry into this direction. Even if donors' attempts to mobilise recipients and include their 'voice' often fail, related processes and interactions can be highly informative. All the more so, as interviewees reveal their intentions and moral dedication to avoid such deficits of disregarding recipient perspectives, based not only on abstract postcolonial critique of aid, but also on their own personal memories of being Othered recipients. The author explores such processes to some extent in connection with the case of democracy promotion in

postsocialist countries. Exploring how such recipient experience becomes implicated in donor–recipient encounters also in South Sudanese and other African contexts, and how hegemonic discourses on ‘proper aid’ interact with the operation and effects of such self-narratives may be a further important contribution.

The book combines Latourian and discursive analytical perspectives in an organic way, and engages the reader by its ease and elegance of weaving together ethnography and historic analysis of institutions. Due to its diverse methodology and empirical data collected in multiple institutional contexts and multiple scales, the book may speak to various audiences. It may be of great interest for scholars and students of sociology and anthropology of development and humanitarianism, those working in NGOs and state institutions, and also for those interested in the domains of nationalism and geopolitics.

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