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Book review

An approach of recent social policy issues and services in Hungary: dilemmas of a new compilation of studies

Three years after the exchange of governments and one year before the next elections in Hungary, still affected by the events of the global crisis, an almost 400 hundred page collection of novel articles raised my interest. Regarding the discipline of sociology and social policy, I often manage to find books on special issues, but not a comprehensive one which would give an overall picture of what has happened in Hungary in the last ten years in field of social affairs. Moreover, I rarely manage to find current knowledge on specific national social issues. Thus, finding one which provides an overall view of facts seems quite difficult.

According to the editors, this compilation of articles has almost two decades of antecedents, in the framework of the project called Local Organization of Social Services, with the aim to “*build a bridge among different social cultures and social politics which exist in the United States, Western Europe and the so-called transition countries of Central and Eastern Europe*” (Bódi, Fábián & Lawson, 2012, p. 480). With the collapsing of regimes in this part of Europe, significant changes occurred: the transition into democracy; the introduction of a market economy; privatization and the intention to make this process as smoothly and quickly as possible, without causing enormous disturbances in the operation in national society. A major change in the last years happened in politics, since the former minority party (Fidesz) gained a two-thirds majority in the last election and brought significant changes in numerous fields, such as the labor market, the taxation system, legislation, public administration or the regulations of operation of civic organizations.

During the more than twenty transition years, we may have witnessed significant successes together with significant failures. The persevering attitude to foster the process of accession to the European Union might also be experienced up to 2003, when Hungary signed the Accession Treaty. Some mention this as a new time in the history of the country. We most definitely experience signs of this in reference to the accession funds, large constructions, the transformation of the education system and we may also witness newly experienced symptoms, such as the appearance of poverty, regions lagging behind the heart of the country or the openness and exposure of the country to global market events, globalization.

This book was meant to be an element of a series of comparative research within a larger network in the Euro-Atlantic region, and further issues may be expected in the future on the *status quo* of other countries. Being an element of the series, it is really about what has

happened lately in diverse fields of the most important social fields and what is worth to know when we try to describe the social situation of the country itself.

This compilation includes 18 diverse professional articles on different fields of social issues in Hungary, and I would also say that it includes the most necessary essences. The editors of the volume are Ferenc Bódi, PhD, senior research fellow of Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Prof. Gergely Fábián, PhD, dean of University of Debrecen Faculty of Health and Prof. Thomas R. Lawson, PhD, FUAS professor and director of International programs Kent School of Social Work, University of Louisville, meaning that this book is the result of a solid international scholar research partnership.

The editors have split up the essays of this volume into three different thematic fields: local organization of social services, the subject of inequality and regional policy-treatment of inequity.

The subject of local organization of social services primarily focuses on the historic background and a more general and external approach of the social themes and thereby forms a prequel to the next, more detailed and specific issues. We may read about primarily theoretical approaches, as a prequel, about basics of a model of the evolution of the welfare state, identifying ways and approaches to the management of the social sphere. Some articles have a historical perspective of this issue and follows events through the Hungarian history primarily based on secondary analysis. These findings also have a demographic relevance as well, guiding us through the most important events of the social stages during the socialist regime and after that. We may witness the most urging problems of the state today, the declining number of population and fears of the future generation, so many worries about the labor market policies, the imbalanced situation of the sustainability of labor market events, and the “*split up of the country into liveable and less liveable areas*” (Bódi & Bódi, 2012a, p. 48). Regarding results of one of the most important issues of the book, that is, unemployment and labor market trends, “*the private sector plays a rather small role in increasing the level of employment, and the crisis of 2008 still have an effect on the representatives of the private sector*”. *The current instruments of employment policy involving participants from the private sector are in evidence only to small degree and fall far short of both expectations and opportunities with respect to their effects at the present time*” (Csoba, 2012, p. 380).

The difference of regions is a truly urging challenge of the country as well, and even owing to the European Union accession, some may refer that inequalities from the dimension of economic, chances and cultures do not seem to cease rapidly. Globalization may also have meant the increasing role of decentralization, and also raised the role of interdependence (Giddens, 2008, p. 56), but for those who live and have to live on the edge, this interdependence means the relationship of vicious events and their negative consequences (for example low education-workplace-standard of living). The disintegration, falling apart of local economies and high level of unemployment remain a basic problem for communities on the edge (Bódi & Bódi, 2012a, p. 55). Ways of development are really hard to find in those territories, when the human capacity (such as competence, creativity) does not support local economies. Hence, subsidies and promotion will also miss cities, villages, which are not prepared for that.

We may also miss the signs of local self-governing intentions; a deficit in democracy of rural societies may also be experienced. Through the years of transitions, the number of the voters seems to get lower. Basically, there is a difference by the number of inhabitants up to 2010, the ratio of voters raises with the decrease of the number of inhabitants, it seems that the smallest villages are the most active in voting behavior. It also seems to be vital, that “*mass of people receiving social allowance is situated mainly in those parts of the country, where participation in the local elections was high*” which raises the question of the specific civic duty (Bódi & Bódi, 2012b, p. 74). A prime survey also analyzes political issues. The rural municipalities, regarding the subject of development, became dependent on application funds (mainly EU subsidies). According to the findings (Bódi & Fekete, 2012, p. 383), “*the greatest responsibility in the development of the municipality is attributed to the mayor. The population of permanently underdeveloped places can mostly count on their closed environment*”. Regarding the key question of their research – what does evaluation of local politics and public

life depend on: the development path of the municipalities or the status groups - there is no unifying, direct answer given by the authors.

Regarding poverty, social literatures often discuss its relationship with minorities, mainly the ethnic minorities, like gypsies. We may read a comparative analysis on problem sensitiveness of the roma and the non-roma, discussing most important social issues of the communities. Of the results we may declare that the most urging problem is in relationship with the unemployment status of the affected ones, and we may assume, that other effects stem from this. Public work - and its associated natures – may represent the only opportunity for the unemployed, and although they may be suitable leverages for social problems, “the long-lasting distortion of the local labour market as a result of public work programs becoming permanent” (Fónai, 2012, p. 93). The private examinations and results of Mihály Fónai are worth reading regarding this issue.

The issue of migration in a society towards modernization also needs attention, as some works in the book also hit this area. After a literary review of past events (such as immigration into the USA due to numerous reasons in history - Great Depression, Holocaust, 1956), it is also worth scrutinizing current trends, and it became obvious that we were far behind the other Eastern-European countries. This theme brings us closer to the acceptance of ethnical minorities and foreign visitors. Based on the results of primary survey among students, it became obvious – by the opinion of young respondents – that we are best friendly and tolerant with the Hungarian minorities abroad, and we are the least tolerant with our ethnical minorities, the Roma.

One of the most important issue of the book – as it is indicated on the cover - is about the complex crisis. “*Crisis is the malfunctioning of the society*” (Bódi, 2012, p. 129), which has numerous dimensions, and there is a strong interaction between them. A “*country of the benefited*”, where “*households mostly depend on pensions and pension-like benefits*” (Bódi, 2012, p. 137) may become more vulnerable when worst comes to worst. During the last twenty years the hierarchy of the society is constantly transforming, the population is growing old, and the related burdens of the employed seem to be growing. The crisis does not seem to be over, and beside the numerous investments, policies, no one really knows what has to be done to get it over.

The largest part of the book, the subject of inequalities reveals discrepancies and tensions inside the country’s social system, with most of the examinations based on primary research. Regions and settlements on the periphery face numerous deficiencies. An important issue besides the unemployment is the health state of the inhabitants, and the accessibility of specific health care services are hard, and the “*welfare slope regarding the accessibility of basic health care has become even steeper, in rural areas it became penetrated*” (Bódi & Horváth, 2012, p. 147). Besides the general approaches of the subject, we may find specialties on different fields and territories. The Eastern part of the country is characterized by the worst indicators, such as the poverty index, unemployment rate. We may read results of primary researches in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County, trying to reveal trends and events comparing the situation before and after the crisis. The social situation and life conditions of the Roma are also discussed in this part of the book, by representing results of an overall research project among two Roma communities in the city of Tiszavasvári. An important aspect of a research like this is the comparative approach of the two communities, discussing besides objective factors such characteristics as the mental status, and from the result it seems clear that a dominant ratio of them “*see their future as hopeless and became indifferent and unsatisfied with anything*” (Fónai & Vitál, 2012, p. 239). The question of usuary (requiring loans at a high/extreme interest rate) among the poor usually has only been subject of the media, in this book we may read the results of primary examinations by interviews recorded from inhabitants of slums. In a poor area “*nearly everyone knows the institution of usuary*” and for every one of ten people, usuary is the primary source of getting money, “*since many people do not have many opportunities to get money from elsewhere*” (Fábián, Szoboszlai & Hüse, 2010, p. 256).

This set of article also emphasizes the field of education, as well. One of the most frequently discussed subjects is the closure of schools. The researchers revealed the different characteristics of the closed schools and stated that there were “*no relation between school reorganization and their physical conditions*” (Balácsi & Bódi, 2012, p. 313). They identified one difference between closed and non-closed schools: “*in the case of the former it was more*

frequent that children commuted to other neighborhoods rather than to choose the given schools” (Balázsai & Bódi, 2012, p. 313).

Trying to access to visions for the future, authors of the books also tried to highlight current attitudes of the youth of their most pressing problems, through various indicators. “*Young people in different financial situations, living and consuming conditions have different views of the circle of the most serious generation problems*” (Laki & Szabó, 2012, p. 349), and Youth 2008 survey (Bauer & Szabó, 2009, p. 9) tried to identify its most important features. “*There is a rather worrying image of society behind where uncertain present, unplannable and unreliable future, the fear from unemployment, the chance to get into poverty are shaping the spirit, way of living and life strategies*” (Laki & Szabó, 2012, p. 356). Many of the youngsters feel they are drifting without any aims and are confused. The country did not move towards the development of a modern society, “*if there is among youth a shared, widespread feeling of insecurity, incalculability and that they have no real aims in life to follow*” (Laki & Szabó, 2012, p. 356).

I would also divide the included essays into at least two main categories, those which fell into the category of secondary analysis and those which have primary research background. Most articles reach the period of the beginning of the crisis, and results are also valid shortly after that. By focusing the examination periods of most of the examinations, one weakness of the collection seems to be revealed: the subheading of the book refers to the fact, that most examinations, publications will be dealing with the crisis, reactions to that, and changes (necessary or already made) but as a matter of fact only few ones deal with these issues. Actually, I hardly managed to find details of the crisis, although one of my first expectations was to learn more what led us to the crisis and related crises in the field of social services, and what initiations and tries have already been launched to treat drawbacks of that. We must feel satisfied with the findings and accept that the reader should receive a lot on social issues and services, trends, events of the near past by reading the professional articles, but should not expect to learn more of crisis related issues. The sub-heading does not seem to be fortunate in this respect.

In conclusion, I found this compilation of articles very interesting, owing to the diversity of the fields in social policy represented and the examination of current events and trends. The composition of the authors suggests that this publication goes beyond what is usually offered in a volume of conference proceedings; this publication appears to be a thorough guide to the history of the past twenty-fifty years of social affairs, while also reflecting the current state of affairs, which have been exacerbated by the global economic crisis. I would recommend this research to all those interested in a country in social transition, be them scholars or students who are at their first approach to the subject of Hungarian social policy areas.

György Szabados

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