

ICSP Study Day: International and Comparative Perspectives on Social Policy and Financial Crisis, 7-8 September 2009

The International and Comparative Social Policy Group study day took place over the 7th and 8th of September 2009, hosted by the Department of Sociological Studies, University of Sheffield. This well-attended event was sponsored by the ICSP and with support from the SPA and Department of Sociological Studies, was free to participants. This is the second conference organised by the ICSP and we were pleased to welcome a broad range of participants including several illustrious contributors to the field and many postgraduate students.



Following lunch on Monday 7th, Bob Deacon, Professor of International Social Policy at the University of Sheffield, opened the study day with a keynote talk on 'Global social policy responses to the economic crisis' in which he discussed some of the central issues in the policy responses of key international organisations including the UN and its various agencies and the IMF. Of particular concern were questions of potential changes of direction in global social policy, the development of debate within the UN for example around the establishment of a 'social protection floor', the future of global funding of social expenditure, the likelihood of a shift in IMF philosophy and the more general potential for a greater UN presence in global social and economic governance vis

a vis the international financial agencies. This presentation stimulated some interesting discussion around the changing roles and power relations in the global arena and led on to the subsequent two paper sessions which focused firstly on the roles of actors with Rob Hulme talking on the effects of crisis on patterns of policy transfer and Christina Prell presenting some thoughts on the contribution of social network theory to understanding the processes and outcomes of 'big events' such as financial crisis. The second paper session took an economic turn with contributions from Theo Papadopoulos whose presentation focused on 'Polyani's revenge'- questions of market embeddedness over time and the extent to which policy can and will be reframed in the light of recent economic failures, and Kevin Farnsworth who reminded participants that the 'confusion, contradictions, opportunities and risks' brought about by economic events suggests that some reflection and stock-taking is necessary to fully understand what has unfolded, before any 'new economics' and policy futures can be mapped out. These two papers took us neatly to our second keynote presentation, delivered by Professor Michael Hill, currently visiting professor at the Universities of Brighton and London who drew the first day to a close with a thought-provoking account of 'Economic crises and paradigm change' which drew attention to the historical context of economic change, the meaning of 'crisis', and the complex relationships between politics and economics at both national and international level which allow 'revolutionaries' and 'counter-revolutionaries' opportunities to shape responses to critical events. The participants then continued discussions over dinner in the student village and later still at one of the local pubs.

Day two opened with Keerty Nakray's presentation of HIV/AIDS interventions in India, the use of the 'gender budgeting' approach as a means to achieve gender mainstreaming and the impact of international organisations in these fields. Following this, Eunna Lee provided further food for thought in her presentation on the impact of the 1997 financial crisis on social protection policy in South Korea. The country case study theme continued in the final paper session with Mairéad Considine and Fiona Dukelow's incisive analysis of the 'boom to bust' trajectory in Ireland and policy response in the context of domestic-international positioning. In a similar vein, my presentation summarised the position of small but significant national actors on the world stage, Cyprus, Iceland and Jersey, and, reflecting on Iceland's 'pot and pan revolution' and political shift to the left, further thoughts on the potential for value change engendered by crisis.



The event was drawn to a close with an absorbing keynote talk given by Professor Armando Barrientos of the Brooks World Poverty Institute, University of Manchester. Here, discussion returned to the global context with a presentation which considered the impact of economic events on the rise of social assistance programmes in developing countries, and the capacity of social assistance and social policy to combat poverty and vulnerability in the near future. This paper sparked some lively debate around the importance of terminology, the utility of poverty measures such as the 'dollar a day' and the continuing significance for policy of absolute versus relative approaches to poverty. Thus the study day demonstrated well that in international and comparative perspective, very little is really 'new' and that in policy development, debates may become dormant but never moribund.

A publication is planned for 2010 which draws on the presentations and discussion summarised above and we would be keen to hear of others working on this area. This leaves me to thank all those involved in making this an extremely productive and stimulating event, the format of which the ICSP hope to repeat in the future (but without the accompanying financial crisis!).

Zoë Irving, Co-convenor, ICSP