

Neoliberalism and the Civil Welfare Provision in Turkey: The Case of Deniz Deneri (The Lighthouse) Association

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Abstract: The subject matter of this paper is the enhanced role of civil welfare provision organizations in poverty alleviation in Turkey from the mid-1990s, which witnessed specific national and global developments. As part of these developments, new and neoliberal understandings of poverty and the poor, and the preferred role of civil organizations as agents of poverty alleviation gained widespread recognition within Turkish society. In this conference paper, by following the theoretical horizons of the British school of governmentality, it will be claimed that civil poor relief organizations have become the local and national platforms of the production, dissemination and the implementation of these new and neoliberalism-inspired understandings of the poor and poverty within the Turkish welfare regime. This paper and the arguments here are based on an ethnographical fieldwork in a prominent civil society organization between October 2005 and July 2007. The base of the fieldwork study was the Deniz Feneri Aid and Solidarity Association. During the fieldwork, action research methodology was employed, which means a research methodology, “which aims to contribute both to the practical concerns of people in immediate problematic situation and to further the goals of social science simultaneously.” Thus, “there is a dual commitment in action research to study a system [or an organization, classroom and community] and concurrently to collaborate with members of the system in changing it in what is together regarded as a desirable direction. Accomplishing this twin goal requires the active collaboration of researcher and client, and thus it stresses the importance of co-learning as a primary aspect of the research process” (Gilmore et. al., 1986: 161; Reason and Bradbury, 2006). In the context of the fieldwork, the particular significance of the action research is its emphasis on the participation, negotiation and in-between position of the researcher.

Before moving to present the base of the fieldwork and the particularities of the association, it will be briefly delineated the meaning of neoliberalism for the British school of governmentality. In this paper, by neoliberalism it will be meant a discourse, which promotes

“an economic growth, free markets without government ‘interference’ as the most efficient and socially optimal allocation of resources, economic globalization, privatization, which removes the inefficiencies of public sector” (Harvey, 2005). As Lemke claimed (Lemke, 2001), to achieve these objective ends neoliberalism promotes the transcription of the social onto neo-classical economy and to link a reduction in (welfare) state services and security systems to the increasing call for ‘personal responsibility’ and ‘self-care’ (p.203). Thus in neoliberal discourse there is constant interplay between the personal and collective, the rational and responsible, the subjective and objective, and the economy and the political. As Lemke argued (2001b), “the key feature of the neoliberal rationality is the congruence it endeavors to achieve between a responsible and moral individual and an economic-rational actor. It aspires to construct prudent subjects whose moral quality is based on the fact that they rationally assess the costs and benefits of a certain act as opposed to other alternative acts. As the choice of options for action is, or so the neoliberal notion of rationality would have it, the expression of free will on the basis of a self-determined decision, the consequences of the action are borne by the subject alone, who is also solely responsible for them. This strategy can be deployed in all sorts of areas and leads to areas of social responsibility becoming a matter of personal provisions” (p. 12).

To construct this prudent, moral, responsible and rational subject, neoliberalism promotes an alliance between the state, market and the non-state actors to conduct the social with its own governmental rationale, which means “a way of thinking about the nature and practice of government (who can govern; what governing is; what or who is governed) capable of making some form of that activity thinkable and practicable to both its practitioners and those on whom it is practiced” (Gordon, 1991: 2). In the public policy debates, as Harris argued (1999), governmental rationalities govern

all those forms of thought which consider the principles guiding the allocation of public funds and the grounds on which government intervention should rest...” Secondly, they entail the questions of ‘who should govern’ (priests, philanthropists, employers or bureaucrats, for example), of ‘what governing is’ (reforming or disciplining the individual, providing public work and/ or assistance in money or kind) and of ‘what should be governed’ (the poor themselves, a category called ‘poverty’, income distribution or labor force opportunities) (p. 34).

To research the civil formations of neoliberal governmentality and the reproduction of these governmental rationalities in the civil arena in Turkey, the Deniz Feneri Association was chosen, since that the association is a complex organizational site in terms of the intermingling of certain traditional, religious, and “common-sense” conceptions of poverty and the poor; a heterogeneous blend of Islamic discourse of compassion and morality, conservatism and Turkish nationalism, and the discourse of the civil society with “modern”, entrepreneurialism and neoliberalism-inspired poor relief activities.

Since even the most one sided embedded-ness requires the slightest of adaptations, as it will be demonstrated in this paper this new politics of poverty and the poor in Turkey exemplifies a neoliberal regime of civil conduct in Turkey, fused with these local understandings of poverty and the poor as well as Turkish society, state and citizenship. By researching the governmental rationalities of poverty and the poor of this association, it was maintain that the organizational procedures, structures, discourses, projects, nets, action plans and subjects of the Deniz Feneri Association and its existing conceptions of poverty, destitution and penury – in their process of adjustment to and re-formation of the neoliberal hegemony— embody the complexities and peculiarities of the local politics, formations and histories of poverty in Turkey from the late 1970s onwards within a wider global framework. In the conclusion part of this paper, on the basis of the given organizational fieldwork study, shortcomings of the theoretical horizons of the governmentality studies will be briefly mentioned. Accordingly, on the basis of the fieldwork study, it will be shown that how governmentality studies largely under-research both the power-ridden and dialogical process

of policy making and implementing and their transformation in social and civil environments by focusing on the results of this social power on social subjects and groups but i.e. not the power ridden relations between the poor, volunteers, donors, organizations and public authorities in given settings.

Reference

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