

Book Review

Øland, T. (2019). *Welfare work with immigrants and refugees in a social democratic welfare state*. New York, NY: Routledge.

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Øland, an associate professor in educational research at the University of Copenhagen, has provided a postmodern, post-Enlightenment, qualitative study of welfare work in Denmark. In this context, welfare work is not a narrow field such as social work or charity work, but a very broad term that includes any and all professionals and volunteers who work with immigrants and refugees in Denmark, from medical professions to educators to police and even street volunteers (N = 48). The explicit aim of welfare work is the socialization and inclusion of newcomers in Danish society, but Øland argues that “welfare work in the margin of our societies [is] central to the reproduction of the state, since the state and the margin are continuously shaped in opposition to each other” (p. 3). This means that welfare work is part of the processes of Othering. She is not questioning the intentions of welfare workers, but how the desire to do good may reproduce marginality, keeping the immigrant/refugee ever on the outside, uncompleted, and unfulfilled. They are “projects in need of continuous amendment” (p. 10).

The twelve chapters form three sections. In the first section, Øland describes her understanding of a social democratic welfare state, her methodology (snowball, purposive sampling and interviews), and a historical sketch of the rise of immigration to Denmark. The second section contains four chapters in which Øland processes her sociological interviews. Each of these chapters approximates a reflective essay, providing considerable insight into the author’s understanding of the raw data collected in the sociological interviews. For clarity, the reader

is directed to her eighth chapter, a useful summary of her too brief conclusions in Chapters Four through Seven. In the last section, the thematic analysis continues as the seven topics reflected on in the second section are subsumed into three broader themes for additional consideration.

To Øland, the Danish welfare state is democratic, rational, universal, and perfectible. It assumes the superiority of the modern and post-racial Danish society and seeks to integrate immigrants and refugees through welfare work informed by technical analyses and evidence. In contrast, her postmodern approach to the interviews intentionally sought out the irrational, uncertain, and absurd underlying welfare work. She wanted to find the conflict and contradictions that are described as symbolic resources in the second section. These symbolic resources “presuppose inclusion of the desirable as well as exclusion of the repulsive or impure” (p. 16). By establishing boundaries, symbolic resources create value and legitimize welfare work. Presented in four pairings, the symbolic resources are a citizen’s right to social welfare presupposing conformity and individual human rights asserting autonomy; cultural modernization or normative integration in contrast to affirmation of immigrant group identity; externally required human development in contrast with human development motivated by economic stimulus; and national objectives in contrast with local community intentions. This section concludes with a summary chapter providing a useful overview to her symbolic resources.

The last section continues Øland's thematic development by reconsidering her symbolic resources in three societal forms. "Social forms are understood as patterns and structures abstracted from interactions and relations that make and remake the social myths of society and make and remake power relations in society" (p. 149). The three she identifies are benevolence, supremacy, and critique.

The problem with benevolence is that a compassionate response to one who is needy devalues the one who is needy and precludes her social right to welfare if change is obstructed or the neediness uncorrectable. Øland tries to explain how this is rectified by the needy one becoming subsumed into a needy class – the worthy immigrant and refugee. This places immigrants at a paternalistic distance and creates dependence. This approach maintains the status quo of racialized differentiation and society's power structures. "[T] ones who cannot give, but only receive, and who are not expected to give in the future are assigned the lowest status" (p 162).

As related to welfare work, supremacy is the attempt to act on or influence the immigrant toward a better way of life, presumably Danish. Welfare workers tend to view Denmark as modern and all other cultures as backward. This is likened to colonization. "Ideals such as freedom and equality were only applied to the colonized group internally, but not to the relation between the colonizers and the colonized" (p. 88). The Other is on the threshold of modernization, but held in transition. White supremacy becomes legitimated as objectivity in its privileged relationship to the immigrant who is also presumed to be inferior. The welfare worker exercises authority over the immigrant as an agent of state or institution, but supremacy is maintained as well in less overt ways. The presumption that whites speak for humanity or the depiction of immigrants as animalistic or infantile carry the same flaws. To Øland's dismay, there is a racial quality to this othering.

Most welfare worker interviews contained a critique of society, the welfare system, or professional groups/competencies. She attributes this to Foucault's suggestion that positivistic science and the development of a rationalized state and economy gave rise to refined techniques of state-like powers that were obstacles in meeting the needs of immigrants and refugees. Critiques oppose what these powers are creating or have created. Øland sees this playing out in two ways: a modern critique that uses the technology (science, EBP) to maximize welfare, and a postmodern critique that questions the foundation for the standards governing maximization and optimization. The latter is often done by welfare workers from within, challenging the official guidelines or refusing to devalue or Other the immigrants.

For those unfamiliar with postmodern thought and writing, this book is heavy lifting. Understanding what Øland is trying to communicate is difficult and probably requires more than one reading. What may be even more problematic for the American reader is that one must assume a Danish mindset to understand Øland's near shock at discovering racial undertones in welfare work in Denmark. As the single European nation to refuse to participate in Hitler's pogrom of the Jews and other marginalized peoples during World War II, the Danish self-image appears to reject racial explanations of difference. What Øland found was quite the opposite. The presumption of Danish superiority, immigrant and refugee inferiority, and the marginalizing effects associated with welfare work could only be described by her as racializing. The moral is not difficult to understand: National values and professional values alone are insufficient to accept difference and diversity. Those receiving immigrants and refugees have to be capable of embracing the change that difference and diversity will bring to their society and nation. Only in this way can the ideals of a social democratic welfare state be realized.