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Dis/Ordering the World

Abstract: This chapter investigates in which ways the notion of sovereignty together with its shifting conceptions form part of the foreign aid regime governmental rationality. Distinguishing between the conservative/conflictual and the transformative/cooperative potential intrinsic to any gift-giving practice, Furia then uses these categories to analyse the ways in which foreign aid practices have been interpreted and themes such as poverty, inequality and the obligation to extend aid, have been constructed and put into practice in the operations of the foreign aid regime. In conclusion, the same categories are applied to the notions of community/immunity and order/disorder, to show how the foreign aid regime proliferates through the continuous interplay between the one(s) and the other(s).

Keywords: global dis/order; global justice; poverty/global inequality; quasi-states; sovereignty

What started as a regime of international government of North–South relations, the foreign aid regime has over the years rapidly expanded to a regime of government of recipient countries and of selected groups of population within and across them. Whereas the affirmation of the principle of equal sovereignty is one of the conditions that have made possible the establishment of the foreign aid regime, its expansion has been nurtured by the ways in which the notion of sovereignty has been increasingly revised in order to allow, as in the nineteenth century, for a differentiation amongst states in the international domain. On the one hand, the equal sovereignty of all states is the condition that makes it possible to present foreign aid interventions as technical interventions, as interventions promoted by ‘specialised agencies with a limited mandate in relation to a sovereign state’ (Anders 2005: 47). On the other, the foreign aid regime has proliferated upon the ways in which the notion of sovereignty has been reconceptualised in international theory and practice. In addition, the foreign aid regime has contributed in a peculiar way to pave the way to this conceptual shift. Foreign aid interventions contribute to fragment recipient states’ space of sovereignty through their ‘networked’ form of governmental rationality, and their territorial and non-territorial forms of interference and interaction (Duffield 2002: 1062). But they can do so because they have been increasingly entrusted with the task of enabling recipient states to resume or enhance the ‘quality’ of their (domestic) sovereignty and relations.

The intrinsically ambiguous nature of foreign aid practices also translates into the elaboration of ambivalent notions of order and international community, which can be analysed by drawing from reflections on gift-giving practices. In literature, the inherent ambivalence of gift practice has given rise to two main, divergent interpretations. The first one focuses attention on gift-giving’s conflictual potential of domination and appropriation, on its being related to the affirmation of superiority and hierarchy and thus on the conservation of distance between actors. According to the second one, the extension of a gift is a gesture, a practice that carries with it a transformative potential for it aims at promoting cooperation and reciprocal recognition, at reducing distance between the giver and the receiver, and therefore at creating a new space of interaction. When the extension of a gift takes place in a context of inequality, as in the case of the foreign aid gift, the question of the conservation or reduction of distance becomes critical and even more ambiguous.