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Dilemma and Knowledge - Book Review of Re-Imagining Utopias: Theory and Method for Educational Research in Post-Socialist Contexts

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Dilemma and Knowledge

This collection of chapters by approximately 20 experts in the field of education combines decades of firsthand research in post-Soviet contexts and the links between cultures, states, and political frameworks as they impact pedagogy, research, and institution building. The book aims to create spaces for multiple knowledge to coexist by "(re)imagining theory in education through irony, ambiguity, and possibility;" in doing so, the authors are unified in their approaches, which serve to underline that neither theory nor praxis in education are easily transferable across cultures or national borders (p. 302). Some of the strongest points in the text are where the authors reflect upon their own positionality within the academy; each acknowledge their insider/outsider relationship to the cultures that they study, whether by way of heritage or length of time spent living and working in a specific country. Their reflections bring into question the oftentimes invisible or taken-for-granted assumptions and reductive thinking that can come to limit other alternatives for understanding post-Soviet regions as being in perpetual "transition."

This publication arrives at a timely moment. The title, *Reimagining Utopias*, evokes recent public debates taking place across Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union—not only on how to reform state institutions, but also, about how to memorialize and identify oneself and one's community with the rise of new social, communications, and other technologies in the wake of the 20th century. The riddle at the heart of the book is about frameworks: How do we recognize the pressures that they exert within ourselves and our environments? Do they enhance or limit our imagination? How do we reconcile and move beyond conflicting frames in order to articulate new ones—and when is it appropriate and/or unnecessary to attempt to do so?

Unique to *Reimagining Utopias* are its breadth of contextualized case studies and depth of primary material (including many firsthand interviews). Organized into five sections, the book is especially useful because it roughly mirrors the key points in the flow of a project from start to completion: i.e., "Section 1: Researcher Positionality, Power, and Privilege" to "Section 3: Data Collection, Collaboration, and Ethics," etc. Structurally, this model prioritizes dialogue and co-constructed knowledge, rather than focusing on management hierarchies, standardization, or measuring achievement gaps. As the editors write, by way of an invitation to a dialogue, rather than a conclusion: "This book has aimed to explore what occurs as the new and old utopias of social science confront the new and old utopias of post-socialism" (p. 302). Reflexivity becomes a starting point for innovation. The diverse set of case studies presented in the book also serve to undercut abstract universals, existing narratives, taken-for-granted beliefs, and theoretical boundaries. These approaches perform important conceptual work in moving education both about and within post-socialist contexts into more interdisciplinary directions.

These authors are brought together by a strong connection to the Comparative and International Education Society (CIES), based in the U.S., yet their multiple backgrounds, locales, and mobility within academic communities complicate the legacies of the Cold War wherever they

appear in their analyses. While the focus is on the nations of Eastern Europe, Russia, and Ukraine, other contributions featuring Azerbaijan and post-socialist Africa also add invaluable comparative perspectives, especially where the book emphasizes a greater need for understanding how local traditions and broader reforms interact, which can sometimes come into conflict with one another. For instance, Mark Malisa's chapter "Masakhane, Ubuntu, and Ujamaa: Politics and Education in (Post) Socialist Zimbabwe, Tanzania, and South Africa" confronts the assumptions that can cause Western researchers to overlook paradoxes or ambiguities as key sites for meaning-making: "education researchers must be open and willing to accept that there are alternatives to Westernization and that the knowledge gained through Western theoretical frameworks may be insufficient to address the dilemmas produced by the colonial encounters" (p. 305). Different answers are threaded throughout each contribution, yet all pivot on a common search to increase community involvement through more egalitarian research processes, sharing of findings, and inclusion of local voices into sustainable outcomes.

The main scholarly contribution of the book is its methodological insight, ranging from critical analyses for reevaluating the position of the researcher, negotiating ethical dilemmas during fieldwork, to the role of research and teaching in community engagement and activism. Ideas are presented as open-ended questions and challenges to readers to find more creative and open-format avenues for knowledge production.

This global framework adds to a growing body of scholarly literature that expands opportunities by reevaluating the sociocultural function of education. Comparable texts in this area include *Globalizing Knowledge: Intellectuals, Universities, and Publics in Transformation*, by sociologist Michael Kennedy.

Some unavoidable drawbacks to the book's aims of facilitating alternative knowledge production include practical barriers; the most critical of these are those that limit the dissemination and implementation of findings from these studies, such as underfunding or low availability of educational technologies in the institutions where the fieldwork itself was conducted. Ensuring that the populations benefit from the research conducted in their schools and communities might be beyond the scope of this book, but could inspire further work especially in policy-relevant journals and periodicals.

This work will likely enjoy a wide readership, especially as researchers across the disciplines grapple with how to position themselves in light of swiftly changing contexts, such as in Ukraine, where the expanded possibilities for change that defined the social imaginary after the Maidan Revolution have rearranged their shape in that nation's ongoing conflict with Russia. Western frameworks and the complexity of local political struggles shaped by history and different forms of subjugation play an important role in every chapter featured in this book. This is especially apparent where each author shows how post-colonial considerations of knowledge and epistemic difference can shift the status of different populations in the present. Michelle Kelso's chapter, "Reflections on Holocaust Education of the Roma Genocide in Romania" is a good example of when and how the role of a researcher may challenge locally accepted frameworks by re-situating knowledge. The book's conclusion offers a pathway "to forge collective hope," by thinking more critically about the varied impacts that researchers—in the broadest sense of the term—can have on the networks of people, ideas, and institutions bridging North America and post-socialist settings today.