

A Research Note on the Sociology of Translation and its Application to the International History of Forecasting

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In this presentation I will focus on forecasting, which I define as the production of anticipatory knowledge for the purposes of planning, governance and management. The vast and heterogeneous literature on the roots of forecasting suggest that it can be traced to a set of related innovative theories, techniques and approaches such as cybernetics, Operations Research and systems theory, which were developed between the 1940s and the 1960s, particularly through the building of British and US defence systems during Second World War. In the early 1960s Western ideas about forecasting that could be applied beyond technology assessment to societal and economic developments were introduced in the Soviet Union.

Transfer of ideas and technologies is not, as has often been noted, a neutral activity that can be likened to sending a parcel via the post, but a highly complex and normatively charged process. Being a hybrid assemblage of politics, management and scientific knowledge production, the international transfer of forecasting is an apt example of this complexity. In my on-going research project that is part of FUTUREPOL at CEE-Sciences Po, I ask: how was forecasting adopted by opposing political and economic systems, i.e. capitalist liberal democracies and centrally-planned communist authoritarian regimes?

Several theoretical approaches that could be used to study technology and idea transfer can be distinguished. The dissemination approach, for example, focuses on actors, aiming to show how innovators diffuse and adopters, in line, adopt or reject particular ideas or technologies. From this point of view forecasting is indeed treated as a complete package sent, received, unwrapped and used.

The translation/imitation approach, promoted by Gabriel Tarde, Michel Serres, Michel Callon, and Barbara Czarniawska, among others, constitutes a broader focus than the dissemination approach because it examines a more diverse range of practices and actors that are associated with transfer. Therefore, understanding the way forecasting travels through translation is to study it as a complex process that involves the building of new institutional settings, the outcome of which constitutes change in the very environment in which transfer takes place.

My case study of the transfer of forecasting as translation focuses on anticipatory knowledge production at the International Institute of Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA), established in 1972 at Laxenburg, Austria. IIASA was a joint US-Soviet initiative with its origins in the mid-1960s. It was a key institute in developing approaches to policy making based on systems theory, rational decision

sciences and computer based prediction models. These models found diverse fields for application in global energy, population and the environment.

The transfer of forecasting through IIASA draws attention to an often overlooked aspect of transfer, namely the role of infrastructure and maintenance, the importance of which was highlighted in the work of Gabrielle Hecht and Paul N. Edwards. Providing infrastructure for the transfer of forecasts involved the institutionalisation of diplomacy outside the principal political arenas, fostering formal and informal relations, and finally, learning from other organisations, such as CERN and the IAEA.

The productive outcomes of the transfer of forecasting through IIASA involved, initially, the construction of a particular version of the political world as dominated by two super powers, but then, the extension of the political world into the natural world (nuclear winter, acid rain, global warming). After the transfer of forecasting, in the other words, neither the world, nor its forecasts were the same.

This all said, how do we get out there and conduct an actual study of an international transfer as a translation? In my view, a few method tools can be borrowed from historical and sociological disciplines. First, a traditional archives document based study can be complemented with oral history. It is difficult to overemphasise just how important oral history is in relation to Cold War period. In some cases one can benefit a lot from talking with the informants as they can highlight social and political tensions that might have lurked behind certain decisions. Second, when doing oral history interviews, it is fruitful to rely on qualitative interviewing techniques. In my work, I use semi-structured questionnaire that allows me to compare responses obtained from different informants and, in turn, to establish the presence of different points of view, the salience of the issues and other points that otherwise might be difficult to observe. Thirdly, a combination of archives study and oral history is a good way to reconstruct networks. Oral history here may give some good access to informal practices and unrecorded events. Archival documents, in turn, may fill in the lacunas of human memory: not many can list individuals who were present at meetings several decades thereafter! I would like to think that I have used these mixed methods to some good success in the studies that paved path to several recent publications. Rindzeviciute, E. "The Politics of Governance in an Authoritarian Regime: Hybridization and Purification of Cybernetics in the Soviet Union", in *Archiv fur Sozialgeschichte*, 50/2010: 289-309; and "Internal Transfer of Cybernetics and Informality in the Soviet Union: The Case of Lithuania" in *Reassessing Cold War Europe*, edited by Sari Autio-Sarasmo and Katalin Miklossy. London and New York: Routledge, 2011: 119-137.