

Reimagining Utopias: Theory and Method in Educational Research in Post-Socialist Contexts. Ed. Iveta Silova, Noah W. Sobe, Alla Korzh and Serhiy Kovalchuk, Rotterdam/Boston/Taipei: Sense Publishers, 2017. Bold Visions in Education Research, Volume 55.

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This peer-reviewed edited collection presents an interesting and eclectic mixture of reflections, accounts, theoretical ideas and analysis of the complexities of doing research in post-socialist settings. The underlying questions and intentions collectively addressed by the authors include: the possibilities of *(re)imagining research to articulate new theoretical insights about post-socialist education transformations in the context of globalization*; the possibilities of *(re)imagining methods to pursue alternative ways of producing knowledge*; and ways of *navigating various ethical dilemmas in light of academic expectations and fieldwork realities*. The attempts to answer these questions are organized around four themes: 1) Researcher positionality, power and privilege; 2) Research, community engagement and activism; 3) Data collection, collaboration and ethics; and 4) Disciplinary paradigms and academic traditions. The geographical scope of the volume includes the countries of the former USSR (Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Lithuania, Azerbaijan and Tajikistan), its satellite states (Albania, Bulgaria, Poland, Romania, Slovenia and Croatia) and African states (Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, Tanzania and South Africa).

The authors of the chapters are 24 researchers, practitioners and activists at different stages of their careers. The majority of the contributors were born in the former USSR or its satellite states and received their research degrees in the global West (the USA, Canada, Australia, the UK). Many of them have now made the global West their academic home; fewer returned back to their counties of origin. Another group of authors are researchers originally from the USA who,

initially through their research and now through family connections, have strong links to the post-socialist countries they were set to explore as part of their doctoral degrees. What brings this diverse group of authors together is their attempt to understand their own positionality and share methodological dilemmas they faced in researching at the intersection of different cultures, systems and traditions, including academic ones. Contributors to the volume display complex identities of insiders/outsideers, locals/Westerners, mobile researchers, or “halfies” – i.e. “scholars with mixed national or cultural identities” (3) or, what Niyozov captured in the oft-cited Soviet refrain, “the ‘our’ among others and other among ‘ours’” (128). In the eyes of their research participants, researchers were perceived as a diplomat, a moral authority, a family guest and, in different political circumstances, as a spy, with very real consequences and threats, as the reference to Sodiqov’s case in Niyozov’s chapter (119) and other recent examples of researchers imprisoned on the grounds of espionage or national treason demonstrate.

The lack of trust and suspicion towards research activity are stark reminders of human tragedies experienced by people in these parts of the world, including the atrocities of Holocaust, civil wars, the Cold War, colonialism and different types of dictatorships. Two researchers made the complexities of teaching Holocaust education in Lithuania (Beresniova) and Holocaust education of the Roma genocide in Romania (Kelso) the focal point of their analysis. While Beresniova applied an ethnographic toolbox to her study, for Kelso, assuming the role of an activist alongside screening of her film *Hidden Sorrows* opened up spaces for conversations about the ways of “seeing racism [and] learning history” (89). Other methodological approaches put to use in the studies include semi-structured and informal interviews and focus groups, observations, surveys, documentary and historical analysis. The authors mobilise a range of theoretical perspectives, including system theory, capability approach, African worldviews and the Slovenian concept of *vzgoja* – i.e. the formation of an individual, as well as insights from post-colonialism and psychoanalysis, in an attempt to understand educational transformations in post-socialist

contexts and open-mindedly, creatively, critically, dialogically and respectfully engage with post-socialist contexts and participants inhabiting these contexts.

The central concept linking the diverse contributions presented in the volume is one of *utopia*. It was put forward by Woldeyes (261–280), referenced by Malisa (281–297) and advanced by the editors. Woldeyes evokes the concept of *utopia* in relation to African and post-socialist traditions. As Woldeyes explains: “African socialisms live in our experiences, histories and memories as traditions; they are not static artefacts or stagnant rituals or simply written stories. They present “ images of utopia” that rekindle “a longing for a socialism that never existed” (Pitcher & Askew 2006 p. 9” (263). In the book abstract, the editors apply the concept of *utopia* to refer to both “the new and old utopias of post-socialism and the new and old utopias of social science.” They explain their intention of mobilizing “re-imagining utopias” in the title “both to signal that the volume engages with the shifting social imaginaries of post-socialist transformations and to highlight the ways in which social science research is itself fully implicated in the project of producing and managing collective visions of the future” (301). However, this latter treatment of *utopia* in relation to social science imaginaries remains underdeveloped. It is unclear if *social science imaginary* and *utopia of social science* have the same meaning. The concept of *utopia* is not taken up by other contributors, and the task of making relationships between concepts advanced in the chapters and the concept of *utopia* is left to the reader. Similarly, the relationship between *utopia* of social sciences and *theory* calls for further explanation.

While the volume aims to pay equal attention to theory and method, the contributions discussing methodological dilemmas dominate the volume. The section on disciplinary paradigms and academic traditions includes contributions on self-perpetuity of institutional cultures in post-socialist contexts by Shaw, a historical account of *Tirguamme*—an Ethiopian traditional method of knowledge production by Woldeyes, theorization of standardized assessment in Croatia through the lens of capability approach by Cosic, historical, theoretical, methodological and comparative account of Slovenian pedagogy by Lesar and Ermenc, and Malisa’s chapter, which

shows the value of using indigenous concepts to understand the relationships between utopia, development and education within the contexts of Zimbabwe, Tanzania and South Africa and includes quotations from both Mandela (290) and Mugabe (292).

The volume has many strengths, among which is an attempt to pull together 20 years of education scholarship in post-socialist settings and give a voice to a diverse group of researchers, whose fieldwork reflections and experiences are not fully accounted for in mainstream textbooks on research methodology. Another collective achievement of the authors is the continuous critique of the superiority of Western-centric theoretical and methodological frameworks, the strong rejection of “epistemic violence” (263, 265) and calls for renegotiated relationships with Western knowledge, which will allow “multiple knowledges to coexist” (305). Most skilfully, the process of renegotiation and attendant transformation is presented in the chapter by Niyozov, who recognizes “how the Soviet and post-Soviet methodological insights have been synthesized into my western reflexive and critical-constructivist analytical framework,” and the extent to which “re-appreciation of Marxism as an analytical approach came as a result of a journey into western academia and into my sub-consciousness” (128).

The book would be of interest to different audiences, including budding and experienced researchers, practitioners, activists and students of Research Theory and Methods courses, as well as representatives of governmental organizations, pedagogical universities, ministries of education and schools, who agree to participate in the current and future studies of educational transformations in post-socialist settings. The contributions in the volume speak to different audiences, who are directly or indirectly involved in the world of education and education research in post-socialist contexts. However, to achieve true equality in this conversation, and for the engagement to become truly dialogic, a volume such as this needs to speak to these different audiences in their native languages. Many of the researchers, despite their deep commitment to the context, do not do this because of the relentless pressures of Western academe, which many have now adopted as their new academic home. Only then will writings like the ones included in

this volume offer spaces for understanding, dialogue and equality, where multiple knowledge(s) not only coexist but also thrive together.