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When Translation Fails: Governance as Fashion, Security and the United Nations Peacebuilding Commission

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Security is often projected by governance researchers as the field most resistant to innovation. The reasons given are conventional some variation of the Schmittian argument that policies dealing with the exceptional (e.g. violence) remain with the sovereign. Yet one of the most innovative recent international organization experimenting with various innovative ideas of governance we can find exactly in the field of international security: The United Nations Peacebuilding Commission (PBC). The mandate of the commission is overcrowded with references to recent governance innovations: a multi-stakeholder model, transparency, participation, country ownership, coordination and policy harmonization, or compliance through mutual trust, to mention only some. Yet, the body (at least in its two initial working years 2006 and 2007) is largely a dysfunctional one. In other words, it is a case of failed innovation in governance.

The paper follows the argument of organizational sociologist Barbara Czarniawska to understand innovation as fashion. Fashion means that a new idea is on the one hand imitated to a sufficient degree, but allows for identity through alterity on the other. Fashion moreover directs our attention to the processes in which a fashion is translated into local practices. Following such a perspective, which anchors both in Georg Simmel's sociology as well as the sociology of Translations (or Actor-Network Theory), I develop two arguments of why the innovations failed in the case of the PBC and why the organization remains dysfunctional. That is, firstly, a failure of local translation. The organization failed in translating the innovations in a way that they correspond to the (peacebuilding) problems the organization was tasked to address. Secondly, the multiplicity of innovations. The commission experiments with too many new governance ideas at once. The ideas clash to a high degree. In the paper I reconstruct the translation processes and discuss why and how different innovations clash.

The paper advances the discussion on innovation of governance in two ways. It firstly elaborates a theoretical framework of innovation as fashion. Secondly it studies an empirical case of the failure of innovation. It hence addresses the question of how innovation processes in governance can be conceptualized and the discussion on what the appropriate methods to follow innovation processes through time and space can be.