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**Political Culture and Post-Communist Transition – A  
Social Justice Approach: Introduction**

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## **Political Culture and Post-Communist Transition—A Social Justice Approach: Introduction**

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“A society is well-ordered,” according to John Rawls, “when it is not only designed to advance the good of its members but when it is also effectively regulated by a public conception of justice” (Rawls, 1971, pp. 4, 5). Although in his own theorizing, Rawls has attempted to derive the justice conception that should govern a society from a philosophical perspective, the quotation represents an insight sociologists like Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, or Talcott Parsons would have been well prepared to share. The stability of a society, the absence of anomie, of normlessness, or even revolt, depend on a conception of justice that, if it is accepted by its members, provides legitimacy to the social institutions and the state. Social justice, therefore, is of crucial interest to political sociologists if they want to find out how social inequality is possible without continuous and unsettling struggles over the division of rewards. If they are informed about the distribution of justice beliefs in a society, they can build up predictive power on the society’s future stability and outlook.

From this perspective, the transition of the postcommunist states in East and Central Europe is of special interest. After the collapse of communism, the evident question was how these states would adapt to the newly found liberal democracy and the free-market economy. Would the “new contract” Gorbachev had pronounced be accepted or would the old socialistic justice beliefs stay in place? In spite of the material hardships caused by the transition, would political support for the new system remain strong enough or would it be affected by economic distress? This had been a central question of political culture research long before it could be studied under the conditions of postcommunist transition societies (Diamond, 1992). Although quite a few sociologists follow Lipset (1959) in his proposal that system support, the endorsement of democracy, is a function

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of economic development, others have taken strong sides in claiming the necessity of an independent political culture safeguarding democracy also in times of unfavorable economic development. In fact, according to this *culturalist point of view*, democracy will only survive if collective political support rests on democratic values.

Although the basic rule of the culturalist credo is that “culture matters,” most culturalists would also agree to three propositions that follow: First, culturalists regard a society as functioning well only if its institutional structure is congruent with the shared values of its members (Almond and Verba, 1963; Parsons, 1971) and second, associated with this assumption, they believe that individual actors are motivated mainly by cultural orientations, not by instrumental and adaptive impulses; that is, their behavior is guided more by norms than by rational choice. Third, cultural orientations are the product of a shared socialization history constituting an integral part of a person’s social identity that is fairly resistant to change. Thus, it may take generations before a system of cultural values is modified noticeably.

However, these assumptions (and some others not mentioned here [Almond, 1980; Eckstein, 1988]) have been called into question. When we say that “culture matters,” to take the most important objection, we do not really know to what extent and in what way this is so. It can hardly be denied that besides the economic development, the actions of the political elite or the functioning of democratic institutions also have an influence in shaping system support. But determining the relative weight of these as well as other factors is difficult, consequently addressing the issue empirically has remained the exception (Linz and Stepan, 1996; Putnam, 1993). Problematic as well is the assumed congruence between the social structure of society and its cultural value system. As a prerequisite of a well-ordered society, this functionalist doctrine is particularly inappropriate in the pluralistic societies of our days. Conflicts over values (Collins, 1975) or even cultural clashes within societies (Huntington, 1996) will not bring societies down inevitably; instead conflict and conflict resolution may well be part of the political culture itself provided the diversity of interests and the different ways of life can be integrated adequately. We also do not know whether, as a general condition, cultural orientations dominate the social behavior of individuals. Weber (1972), for instance, was prudent enough to distinguish four types of motivations of actions (instrumental, normative, affective, and traditional) leaving open the question in which situation which type would manifest itself. Finally, assuming the longevity of a political value system is contradicted by the empirical facts time and again. One of the astonishing findings of studying the transition societies of Eastern Europe, for example, was that the people underwent drastic attitude changes leaving behind the socialist convictions they had been brought up with almost from one day to the other (Hahn, 1991; Plasser and Ulram, 1996). Although many were also quick in rediscovering nostalgically their preferences for the previous system at a later

transition stage (Kluegel *et al.*, 1999; Mason *et al.*, 2000), the value fluctuations as such are incongruent with the socialization thesis that culturalists take for granted.

All this makes culturalism a precarious paradigm. Many political sociologists, in particular if empirically oriented, have argued that the concept is too opaque to be useful for accurate scientific work (Berg-Schlosser, 1999; Dittmer, 1977; Kaase, 1983; Pye, 2000; Welch, 1993). That is why in explaining the transition of the postcommunist societies, political culture research is viewed with skepticism (Di Palma, 1990; Lukin, 2000; Petro, 1995; Przeworski, 1991). Archie Brown, the leading writer on the role of political culture in communism, for instance, defines political culture “as the subjective perception of history and politics, the fundamental beliefs and values, the foci of identification and loyalty, and the political knowledge and expectations which are the product of the specific historical experience of nations and groups” (Brown and Gray, 1977, p. 1). This is a catch-all definition that is of little help when it comes to defining empirically what political culture is in order to study its prerequisites and effects. What we need, therefore, is to reduce the scope of the meaning of the term “political culture.”

In this process, two things seem to be of importance: first, we must be clear about why we need the concept in the first place, that is, what is the *explanandum* or the set of dependent variables that we have in mind? And second, is there a theory we can use in explaining what we want to explain? Certainly, “political culture is not a theory,” as Almond (1980, p. 26), who coined the term originally (Almond and Verba, 1963), has remarked. But if what we aim at is to explain the emergence of legitimacy of democratic institutions, the theory we are looking for has to deal with the conceptions of social justice in a society and with justice perceptions. Although John Rawls, in his later writings (Rawls, 1993), very clearly stresses that normative justice principles must be developed from and be congruent with the political culture of a democratic society,<sup>2</sup> political sociologists who study political culture seem to be confused about what behavior they want to study and what theory to base their explanations on.

Social justice research, in comparison, has produced a body of theories that can be made available to political culture research, and to transition research, in particular. Empirical research on social justice is, first, based on a number of elaborated theories in terms of both micro- and macrojustice (e.g., Berger *et al.*, 1972; Hochschild, 1981; Jasso, 1989; Kluegel and Smith, 1986); second, it can distinguish between different areas of intended applications and is able to operate on different levels of generalization—studying reward justice as well as “justice ideologies” (e.g., Arts *et al.*, 1991; Mikula, 1980; Runciman, 1966; Wegener, 1999); third, social justice research can say something about the stability of justice beliefs over time, that is, how socialized normative justice sentiments are different

<sup>2</sup>Thereby giving democracy priority over philosophy in justifying the selection of justice principles in his theory (Rorty, 1991).

from short-living, self-interested views of justice (e.g., Lerner, 1980; Montada and Schneider, 1991; Wegener and Liebig, 1995). All of this can be brought to bear on the problem of democratic legitimization in postcommunist transition.

The International Social Justice Project (ISJP) is the first research effort to study the relationship between political culture and the postcommunist transition from a social justice point of view. The ISJP is an international collaborative research project that began in 1989 and has involved the participation of more than 30 social scientists from 13 countries. Based on a common questionnaire, the first wave of interviews was fielded in the spring and fall of 1991 in Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Germany (East and West), the Netherlands, Hungary, Japan, Poland, Russia, Slovenia, and the United Kingdom, and in Estonia in early 1992. At the time of planning the project, it was decided to replicate the survey 5 years later in order to assess possible changes in justice perceptions over time. The replication was fielded in the Czech Republic in the fall of 1995 and in East and West Germany, Bulgaria, Estonia, Hungary, and Russia in the fall of 1996. Although not all of these postcommunist states were included in the 1991 survey, they did provide a representative assortment of countries from Eastern and Central Europe. The results of the first survey have been reported in a large number of articles and reports and in two books: *Social Justice and Political Change: Public Opinion in Capitalist and Post-Communist States*, edited by Kluegel *et al.* (1995) and *Marketing Democracy: Changing Public Opinion About Politics, the Market, and Social Inequality in Central and Eastern Europe* by Mason *et al.* (2000). The list of publications, downloadable reports, codebook and methods information, and information about data accessibility can be found on the website [www.isjp.de](http://www.isjp.de). In this issue of *Social Justice Research*, major results of the 1996 replication survey in the postcommunist states compared to those of the 1991 survey are reported analyzing the data to discover trends over the 5-year period.

The first contribution by Svetlana Stephenson (*Public Beliefs in the Causes of Wealth and Poverty and Legitimization of Inequalities in Russia and Estonia*) explores the attributions of the causes of poverty and wealth in Russia and Estonia and their determinants, contrasting, in particular, individualistic explanations that give credit or fault, whatever the case may be, to the individual, on the one hand, or to impersonal "system" explanations, on the other hand. Despite the economic hardships and a rise in inequalities in both countries, individualistic explanations of wealth and poverty have increased over the 5-year period, but explanations in Estonia are more rooted in the factors of socialization, in age, education, and gender, whereas in Russia they tend to be explained by the changes in the family financial circumstances between 1991 and 1996. In both countries, an increase in support for government intervention in distribution could be observed.

Guillermina Jasso (*Trends in the Experience of Injustice: Justice Indexes About Earnings in Six Societies, 1991–1996*) tackles the question of justice straightforwardly by asking how much justice respondents perceive in their respective countries and whether this has changed over the transition years. She analyzes both

the 1991 and the 1996 data from the Czech Republic, Hungary, Russia, Bulgaria, and East and West Germany. Based on the theory of reward justice (Jasso, 1989; Jasso and Wegener, 1997) and the concept of the justice index derived from that theory (Jasso, 1999), the author shows, among other things, that the amount of perceived income justice depends on the demand structure in a society, and that in all investigated countries, except East Germany, demands have risen compared to the factual income levels. Thus, the felt injustice of earnings has increased over the 5-year span, except in East Germany where the actual earnings have risen significantly without demands having increased as well.

Although Jasso's contribution is centered on income perceptions of respondents' *own* incomes, Roland Verwiebe and Bernd Wegener in their paper (*Social Inequality and the Perceived Income Justice Gap*) study how income differences between the upper and the lower strata of a society are perceived and how these differences are evaluated in terms of justice. The difference in the justice evaluations of high- and low-income earners defines what Verwiebe and Wegener call the perceived justice gap. The authors distinguish different types of transitions to market capitalism and test whether these transformation types exert influence on the justice gap perceptions and how this influence compares to the effects that respondents' positions in the stratification structure have. Studying the Czech Republic, Hungary, Russia, Bulgaria, and Germany, main results are that in the early transition phase both the different transformation types and the social positions matter in shaping justice evaluations; over time, however, the types of transformation lose influence. In 1996, compared to 5 years before, the countries have become similar in that most of the variation in the perception of the income justice gap must now be attributed to the positional differences of individuals—a development similar to what we find in the western countries.

Martin Kreidl in his paper (*Perceptions of Poverty and Wealth in Western and Post-Communist Countries*) argues against the dominant ideology theory according to which there exists a legitimizing ideology in a society, but that this dominating ideology usually stimulates a challenging belief that is held by incumbents of specific social positions. In view of poverty and wealth perceptions, it is argued, however, that these perceptions are more complex involving at least three latent dimensions. Individuals distinguish between merited, unmerited, and fatalistic types of poverty, and between merited, unmerited wealth, and wealth mediated through social contacts. In this paper, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Russia are compared to the three western societies: the United States, the Netherlands, and West Germany. Using a structural equation approach and its group comparison option for comparing countries, the different explanations for poverty and wealth are translated into specific measurement models testing simultaneously how preferences for particular explanations are shaped by stratification-related experiences and by the social position of an observer.

Restricting their analysis to East and West Germany, Bernd Wegener and Stefan Liebig (*Is the "Inner Wall" Here to Stay? Justice Ideologies in Unified*

*Germany*) are concerned with whether, after unification, both parts of the country have reached a state of inner unity paralleling that of the material living conditions or not, and what can be predicted for the future in this respect. Based on ISJP data from 1991 and 1996, the focus is on four justice ideologies that are derived from grid–group theory: egalitarianism, individualism, ascriptivism, and fatalism, and it is tested whether these four ideologies form a common set of beliefs in East and West Germany. Results show that they do, but that East and West Germans have very different ideological preferences within this ideological framework. It is tested, therefore, whether these differences are rooted in cultural distinctions between the East and the West or whether they can be explained by the social positions individuals in East and West Germany hold. The authors find little evidence for cultural differences but ample evidence for social structural determination. From these findings, it is concluded that the ideological “inner wall” running through Germany is bound to fall if living conditions on both sides become more alike.

Finally, the last paper of this collection (*Views on Social Inequality and the Role of the State: Post-Transformation Trends in Eastern and Central Europe*) by Antal Örkény and Mária Székelyi is a trend report of the developments in the transition societies regarding peoples’ attitudes towards social inequality, political legitimacy, and the role of the state in distribution processes. In most of the transformation societies, social inequality is believed to have increased over the 5-year interval, in particular, due to rising poverty. Although preferences for particular distribution rules have not changed from 1991 to 1996, there are clear indications that the respondents in the transition countries tend to see life chances and economic success increasingly determined by factors over which the individual has no control. At the same time, political legitimization in terms of trust in institutions has decayed, whereas, paradoxically, the call for state interventions has become more pronounced.

All six contributions have in common that they provide evidence of the close relationship between social justice beliefs and the postcommunist transition. It may well take some time before the political culture of the involved societies has gained the stability of the western democracies. But if political culture is defined in terms of collective social justice beliefs, social justice research can continue to trace this development empirically and report when system support has stopped to be wavering.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Although a third wave of the ISJP survey in the transition countries is not planned presently, Germany will see a new ISJP replication (and the beginning of a long-term panel study) in the fall of 2000.

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