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CHAPTER 3 POST-TRANSITOLOGY OR IS THERE ANY LIFE AFTER TRANSITION?

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1989 witnessed not only the collapse of communist regimes all over the East European and former Soviet Union countries, but also the emergence of a new discipline in social sciences, which has very quickly earned the nickname "Transitology". Its main object of interest was a transition. The term "transition" - which is still the most frequently used when speaking about developments in this region (Mandelbaum 1996) - allowed one to see the processes of systemic change triggered off with the change of political regime as a route with well-defined points of departure and arrival. The societies of the former Soviet bloc were departing from Communism and starting a journey westward. Their goal was a democratic political system with a free market economy.

Certainly, there have been important differences among "transitologists" in the usage of this general approach. Some of them have focused on the past, trying to estimate how far a given society has moved away from Communism, yet others have concentrated on the future, analyzing the prospects of a successful transition to liberal democracy. In both cases, however, attention was paid mostly to threats and obstacles which could hamper the transition. The very idea of transition as the base for analyzing post-communist societies was taken for granted (1). Nobody has asked question: what are the heuristic advantages of using it or is it *the* concept for the analyses of changes taking place in post-communist countries?

Paradoxically enough, the question escapes the attention of even those scholars most discontented with the transition concept. For example, Stephen Holmes starts his recently published essay with the statement that the

"overused term >transition< should probably be junked, implying (...) that we somehow know where we headed" (1996, p.22).

Then, reflecting on the factors which obstruct or blur the understanding of developments in postcommunist countries, he points to the fact that:

"some of the problems lie (...) not in the thing itself but in our approach, in our own concepts, presuppositions, and biases" (p.25).

And he concludes:

"All of this requires a new vocabulary and a new approach" (p.25).

The need for new categories is, however, related by him to a quite old question:

"Why has democratic and market reform turned out to be such an arduous process?" (p.25).

The question, which repeats the key problem of the transition approach, i.e. what are main threats and obstacles for the transition of post-communist countries to a democratic and liberal system.

I would be unjust to Stephen Holmes and his brilliant essay if I did not mention here that he introduces really new element to this approach, suggesting a look for answers not in the past, but in the present. According to Holmes, the most popular theory about the yet unsuccessful or still incomplete democratic and market transition in post-communist countries refers to cultural legacies, i.e. habits, values, and attitudes which were learned under the communist regime and are now obstructing the introduction of new institutions. He argues convincingly, that such a past-oriented approach to the problems with transition is faulty, both methodologically and empirically. A more promising focal point for post-communist studies, in his opinion, is the present crisis of governance.

One could contest Holmes' belief that we do not have to refer to cultural legacies approach to explain the weakness of the state itself. From the point of view adopted in this paper much more important, however, is his attempt at analyzing the *present* processes in post-communist countries in terms of *present* institutional conditions. For the transition approach neglects the present, treating it as an unimportant, simply transitory period between the bad past and a good future. Even more radically, it suggests the end of history, making the contemporary Western model of political-economic system the only point of reference for the analysis of post-communist countries - almost as if there would be no life after transition.

In this sense, the transition approach seems still deeply indebted to Fukuyama's (1989) evaluation of the contemporary history, an evaluation which certainly was influenced by the euphoria stemming from the changes of 1989. With the passage of time, however, the euphoria has been diminishing and today, the question: "What is actually going on?" more often replaces the old question: "To what degree have we approached a liberal democracy?" (or correspondingly: "To what degree have we moved away from Communism?").

A partial answer to the question "What's going on?" can be found in Zygmunt Bauman's essay on systemic transformation in post-communist countries (1993), in which he makes a distinction between political and systemic revolutions. According to Bauman, the revolution is merely political if it shakes off a political regime dysfunctional in relation to the existing socio-

economic system, whereas systemic revolution faces the task of dismantling the existing socio-economic system and constructing a new one to replace it. The examples of the former are recent revolutions in Portugal, Spain or Greece, while anti-communist revolutions in Eastern Europe belong to the other category. The political stage of the latter was only the act of site-clearing and condition-setting for the system-building task.

Crucial for Bauman's reasoning is the concept of system. In sociological thinking the concept is usually identified with institutional structures. In this sense, one should agree with John Mueller (1996) who writes that the post-communist transition to capitalism and democracy, as these terms are properly understood, has already been completed. If, by democracy, we understand a political system in which the government can be overthrown nonviolently, the countries of the former Soviet bloc are democracies. If, by capitalism, we understand an economic system in which it is possible to make a profit legally, they are already capitalist. In short, if we only use realistic standards based on the actual characteristics of Western countries instead of some mythologized ideals, then the political and economic institutional structures introduced during the political stage of systemic revolution testify to the completion of transition.

"Actually, there is some danger" - Mueller warns and I agree with him - "in continuing to refer to the process that is going on as >transitional< because the word suggests that the postcommunist countries are still moving toward future institutional patterns that will somehow be crucially different from the ones that prevail today" (1996; p.103).

This is it, he says, and we can find the reflection of his diagnosis in popular reactions towards the systemic change. The question most often asked in informal conversations at the beginning of the 90's: "How will it end?" ceased to be heard after 1993. As if people realized that "this is for real", not transitional and it is useless to keep waiting for any further improvement of institutional structures.

This does not mean that they have already become accustomed to them. Rather, they gave up an idealized vision of post-communist future, based on a simple notion of social justice according to which, in the new system, good people (not accepting communism) will be rewarded and bad (communist aparatchiks) - punished. It is not surprising, therefore, that the social peace which prevailed - in spite of the economic hardships - during the honeymoon stage of the first "Solidarity" government, was broken by the wave of strikes and social protests in 1992, and that the present attitudes of the population are becoming more and more negative. In the period 1989-1991 people were still waiting for the beneficial consequences of getting rid of the Communist regime, whereas since 1993 they have already learnt that the individuals who will eventually benefit from the construction of the new socio-economic system are not necessarily those who helped to destroy the former one.

In the works of those scholars who tried to avoid the transition concept - the author of this paper included - analyses of that stage of "system-building task" were characterized by emergence of the notion of a "dual society". The idea which underlies it can be described as follows: institutional reforms changed the basic conditions of individual behavior. The new institutional environment privileges some people (with higher education and initiative, aptitude for risk-taking, who live in bigger cities etc.) and devalues the social assets of others (working in heavy- industry sector, living in small towns, uneducated but having a lot of free time for queuing etc.). The resulting differentiation of interests is responsible for a differentiation of attitudes towards reform. In consequence the society divides itself into two opposite parts: one which is for the transition and the other which is against it.

The term "two Polands", used for the description of the processes of interest differentiation seemed quite harmless. Since then, however, it has become excessively popular and has begun to be used for the description of the differentiation of attitudes and opinions. In particular, during the days of the last presidential election one could very often read about the "Poland of Solidarity" and "Poland of post-communism" with the latter meaning support not only for the candidate of post-communist parties but also for most of institutional solutions characteristic of communism. In analyses of this sort, Polish society was presented as *culturally* divided into two parts, fighting against each other for the salvation, or correspondingly, abolition of the very idea of transition (Hall 1996).

The idea of cultural duality, being a specific version of cultural legacies theory, shares with the latter its orientation towards the past, fixed on the compulsion of squaring up to communism, whereas all the empirical studies point to the fact that it is not, even emotionally, the most engaging problem for the society (Marody 1995). Let us dwell for a moment on this issue. It is well expressed by Stephen Holmes who writes, that:

"Historical justice turned out to be a highly specialized concern, holding little interest for either those who look forward or those who look back. The former are devoted to making the most of the possibilities they have, while the latter, far from wishing to right past wrongs, feel that life was, yes, duller, but still "cozier" and more secure under the old regime" (1996, p.32).

One can add to his diagnosis that in popular perception, especially among young people, this "specialized concern" is attributed mostly to political elites and considered to be just an element of the fight for power.

And this can be treated as another partial answer to the above posed general question: "What's going on?". Writing his essay in 1992, Zygmunt Bauman could not forecast so quick process of "wearing out" for the new democratic elites and the equally quick process of adjustment of the elites with

communist genealogy to the conditions of democratic political competition. Both processes resulted in the return of post-communist elites to the political scene of many countries. Certainly, this return does not by any means signify a threat of "restoration of communism" at least in the case of central European and Baltic countries. I agree at this point with John Mueller, who writes:

"Barring some sort of extraordinary, and probably violent, upheaval, the time of fundamental change is substantially over: further developments will take place in environments that are essentially democratic and capitalistic" (1996; p.103).

It means, however, that in order to understand those developments - the course of political fights for social support and their socio-political consequences, among others - we need a really thorough knowledge about the post-communist societies.

Meanwhile, this knowledge is rather poor. It is based on the description of consequences that the communist system brought to the functioning of people under it. At the beginning of nineties there were two predominant approaches to formulating such descriptions. According to the first, people's continuous fight against the communist system succeeded in the emergence of civil society. According to the second, Communism destroyed not only the civil society but the society itself, since

"individuals and social groups lost their identities, becoming parts of a gigantic, centrally planned and centrally run superorganization, which embraced the whole institutionalized structure of the society and controlled every sector of social, economic, and political life. Society was turned into an atomized, unstructured mass of the functionaries of this superorganization" (Tarkowski 1991).

These two opposite images still co-exist, both in theoretical analyses and political rethoric. The "reemergence of civil society" is giving place to the "revival of *homo sovieticus*" which, in turn, is once more replaced by the "civil society" according to current developments or political needs. Instead of explaining anything, both concepts introduce further confusion into already entangled analyses of postcommunist societies. The first does so by assuming the possibility of total separateness between the structures of communist state and structures built "from the bottom" the second - by assuming the invariability of social habits learned under the conditions of communist system.

Hence, if we want to understand the current functioning of postcommunist societies, we should first of all try to explain more adequately their ways of being, shaped in the past. Not for creating another sort of cultural legacies theory, but to be able to analyze current processes in terms of their structural determinants. For among those structural determinants there are not only the new institutional arrangements, but also other social factors which have

structuralized people's behavior in the past and still do, though mostly for different reasons. The best description of such factors is included in the concept of *habitus* defined by Pierre Bourdieu (1973, 1977), as a system of unconscious schemata of thought and perception or dispositions which mediates between institutional structures and practice.

Habitus is a product of the environment or conditions of existence, which means that it is changing with the change of institutional structures. However, a precondition for its change is the process of social recognition of the reality, which is influenced just by the *habitus*. We see what we used to see and, therefore, we act accordingly. As a part of what is socially taken for granted, *habitus* can easily outlive the empirical conditions which have once given birth to it. Therefore, the process of "dishabituation" of a given *habitus* depends more on the social accumulation of new behavioral experiences than on the actual empirical change of institutional structures.

The fact becomes particularly important in the case of systemic revolution in postcommunist countries which has to dismantle not only the communist institutions, but the whole peculiar social system of "real socialism" whose official institutional structures were supplemented and very often also opposed by unofficial structures of social behavior. To this type of structures referred Elemér Hankiss, writing at the end of eighties that the communist system promoted the emergence of "second society", which developed "its organizational principles, steering mechanisms, and networks in the hidden, informal sphere of the social space" (1988; p.18). The real socialism system was, then, composed both of the institutions of the communist state and habitual strategies of the second society.

At the base of those strategies there was a division of social space into a public and private sphere, a division of society into authorities and ordinary people, a division of norms and values into official and unofficial (Marody 1996). In other words, the *habitus* of second society promoted the perception of social reality as composed of two incompatible, and most often opposed, realms, governed with different rules, whereas the successful functioning of the new institutional order means, among others, the necessity of bringing these separate elements of social entity together. Hence, our ability to understand what is going on depends, on one hand, on a deeper diagnosis of the basic elements of pre-transformation *habitus*, and on the other one, on the careful analysis of their present social "distribution". Without such knowledge we will still wonder, why the institutional transition does not produce such results in people's behavior which would be similar to those observed in Western societies.

Another source of *habitus* formed in the past but influencing the present functioning of the postcommunist societies are the processes of selective modernization taking place under the communist regime. As Stephen Holmes reminds us, referring to the work of George Schopflin (1993),

"the >Westernization< of postcommunist societies did not begin from the traditional basis that most modernization theories presumes. (...) Stalinist modernization brought industrialization, urbanization, secularization, mass education, mass communications, and the integration of women into the workforce" (Holmes 1996; p.37).

We should also remember, however, that all these modernization efforts of communist regime were subordinated to the ideological goals and, therefore, they were selective. Various domains of social life were modernized to different degree and at different paces. The communist industrialization was focused on developing, first of all, the heavy industry, mass education was aimed mainly at occupational training; mass communication was more or less strictly controlled, the entrance of women on the labour market did not change significantly their position in family, etc. If we add to all this the fact, that with the passage of time different social groups in different communist countries were exposed in different degree to the modern impulses flowing from the West, the term "selective modernization" seems well grounded in the actual experience of the postcommunist populations.

The general results of these "biased" modernization efforts undertaken by communist regimes can be best described by using the notion of a "civilizational incompetence" introduced by Piotr Sztompka (1993). However, as far as I know, both the course and the actual consequences of these processes of selective modernization for the formation of *habitus* have never been analyzed in more detailed way (2). Nor the impact of the "post-modern" mass culture, now on the offensive in postcommunist mass-media. For sure,

"as George Schopflin has pointed out, east European peasants now have wristwatches and no longer believe in werewolves" (cit.after Holmes, 1996; p.37).

But what are they inclined to believe, instead? - that is the question important for the understanding the present developments. To answer it we should, among others, learn more about the processes of selective modernization.

Last but not least, the *habitus* of the second society was also shaped by some historical processes, the permanence of which in longer periods of time have resulted in experiences common for successive generations and, hence, have become the basis for the identities of societies living under communist regimes. In the case of Poland, the consequences of such processes are - amongst others - the special role played by the Catholic Church in the institutional structure of Polish society, the specific tendency of Polish people to opt for "situational innovativeness" instead of building more institutionalized forms of social life, as well as their tendency towards making political divisions into the moral ones.

There are, maybe, other factors or processes important for the formation of pre-transition *habitus* in the postcommunist societies. Along with the new

institutional structures they are the most significant structural determinants of societal activity which will be responsible for further developments in the region. Institutional reforms introduced after 1989 in postcommunist countries have triggered off both the processes that reinforce the hitherto existing habitus, at least in some situations and in some social groups, and processes that might become seeds of new organizational principles of a competitive civil society.

The identification and analysis of such processes should be the primary task for post-transitology. In other words, if we assume, as John Mueller suggests, that the transition to democratic and free market institutional order is complete (3), then there is the time for just an ordinary sociology with well developed elements of historical social psychology. Unlike Polish peasants, I do believe that there is a life after transition. Moreover, it takes a lot of diverse forms which should be carefully studied if we want to understand its dynamics.

Notes

(1) More detailed discussion of the reasons for the popularity of the transition concept in the vocabulary of social scientists in Michael Mandelbaum (1996).

(2) One of the phenomena which to some degree is, though indirectly, connected to the processes of selective modernization was called by Wasilewski the "ruralization of the cities" (Wasilewski 1986).

(3) Besides of the above mentioned arguments, such an assumption has an important additional advantage: it liberates us from the duty to answer the question of what are the main threats and obstacles for the transition.

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