

PART II
APPLYING CERTAIN THEORIES

CHAPTER 4

SOCIOLOGY ON TRIAL: THE CHALLENGE OF TRANSFORMATION RISKS

Nikolai Genov
Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

The Problem Situation

The relevance of sociology greatly depends on the ability of sociologists to detect, as Max Weber did, profound changes in "the spirit of time". In the midst of the turmoil after the First World War he warned scientists that the certainty of unifying ideologies was lost. The many small gods of everyday preferences have grasped the opportunity to wage their devastating wars. All-pervading conflicts and disenchantment have become the norm in a situation of normlessness. Young people had difficulties in finding general orientation (Weber 1992 [1919], p. 101).

In Central and Eastern Europe the situation is comparable. The old and new eschatological visions of the coming end of the conflictual history hardly find believers any more. Life is full of small battles as it always has been - but there is no ultimate meaning. The dust of political rallies of excited millions has settled. The millions tasted the fruits of the promised land. They are bitter.

What can sociologists learn from this sobering experience? Certainly not to take Francis Fukuyama seriously as suggested (Tiryakian 1994, p. 134). It is probably more promising to have a closer look at what is described as *prekäre Entwicklungen* (Glatzer 1996). And, most of all, to try to adjust concepts and methodology to a reality in flux. Thus, sociology and sociologists in Central and Eastern Europe are on a professional but also on a moral trial. What is at stake is the integrity of the discipline confronted with extreme circumstances. The societies in the region can be properly labeled as risk societies (Genov 1996, Berend 1997). They all are plagued by fundamental disparities between aspirations and need-satisfaction, knowledge and practical action, change and order. In conditions like these sociology cannot escape the fate of being at risk itself. Its cognitive capacities and practical relevance are put on a test as not pay too much attention to science.

There are various ways to react to this type of extraordinary situations. The most promising one is to turn the challenge into opportunity. In the given context this means to focus on the risks of the ongoing transformations.

Risk is further understood as the probability of negative effects of natural or social processes on individual or collective actors. The reason for the

special preference to the concept is not necessarily the view that present day societies are especially prone to risks. Under many circumstances - volcano eruptions, floods, droughts, epidemics or wars, societies in previous epochs have also been risk societies. The real point is that the secularized, individualistic and instrumentally oriented modern societies have developed a specific culture of risk. It lays the stress on the rationally based perception and assessment of risk factors and on the rationalized risk management. This culture of risk and its institutional frameworks are dominated by calculations of risk factors and by accountability for risks. The context of calculations and accountability is the all-pervading competition taking place under conditions of permanent uncertainty and change. In this context the national transformations are major risk factors since they always bring about uncertainty and instability.

There are important cognitive reasons for the special attention to the relationships between risks and national transformations. The concept of risk allows for a transparent coverage of major dimensions of change shaping our present day and the future social reality.

Firstly, the concept of risk allows one to establish a comprehensive picture of the objective and subjective parameters of complex and dynamic situations. The cognitive reduction of complexity comes about by disentangling interrelationships of risk factors and effects. The same holds true for the identification of latent risks and their relations with manifest risks.

Secondly, by concept of risk it becomes possible to clearly identify specific actors involved in situations of risk perception, assessment and management. Who is most at risk? Who might be mobilized to support risk assessment and risk management? How do various actors coordinate their efforts in risk management and with what effects?

Thirdly, focusing on conditions of risk one is forced to analyze the specific complexity of social relations. What types of social relations (hierarchical or associational, cooperative or conflicting, of mutual trust or mistrust, etc.) prevail in a specific historical constellation of risk factors? Do risk assessment and management involve larger circles of interested individuals and groups, or is the process basically closed to circles of experts and politicians? Does the spirit of compromise and cooperation guide the procedures of risk management, or, are they mostly guided by competition and confrontation?

Fourthly, the continuity of risk perception, assessment and management closely corresponds to major stages of social action as a process. It opens the view to short- and long-term prospects of production and reproduction of man-made risks. How long does it take to recognize a risk, assess it and to develop and apply an effective strategy of risk management? Is there a substantial time-lag of risk recognition by experts and 'lay' people, by various groups and strata of society? Are the processes of developing risk perception, assessment and management mostly legally and organizationally formalized or mostly informal?

Fifthly, using the risk concept, one may attempt a systematic qualitative and quantitative assessment of potential negative effects of the major factors determining social interaction. For instance, the results of empirical studies emphasize the relevance of the cultural conditioning of risks (Dake and Wildavsky 1993, p. 51f). What are the cultural models guiding the perception, assessment and management of risks? What is the magnitude, relevance etc. of various risks according to experts and to 'lay' people?

It is impossible to search for answers to the whole range of above questions in a particular study. The task is even more complicated since the national situations of intensive risks are not isolated. How to focus on risks in the current Central and Eastern European transformations when keeping in mind their embeddedness in regional processes and in world-wide trends? The simple answer is: By focusing on processes which obviously have universal dimensions. One of them is individualization. To put it bluntly, what is going on in the Central and Eastern European region might be shortly defined as the triumph of individualization. Previous limitations imposed by the almighty state on mobility, self-expression, and communications suddenly disappeared. We are witnessing the triumph of a cultural and institutional pattern which originated in Western Europe in the XV and XVI centuries, evolved more and more sophisticated and irradiated all over the world. The modernization implemented under various regional and national conditions proved that individualization is an evolutionary achievement. It might be delayed or interrupted by dictatorships, by nationalistic or religious models of "return to community" politics. But it cannot be stopped. Individualization is a universal trend, it is a "diagnosis of our times" but even more "music of the future" (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1994, p. 16).

Scientists studying the trend of individualization in advanced societies overwhelmingly share the view that in its course individuals are increasingly over-exposed to the permanent stress of change. Unstable transitional situations in personal biographies are becoming the rule. Multiple identities are often schizophrenic situations. The dynamics of identities turn into a lack of continuity and integration. As seen exactly from the point of view of individualization one may regard advanced societies as risk societies offering risky freedoms (Beck 1994) to individuals. The growing autonomy of individuals has anomic implications which lead to individual disorientation and deviance coupled with organizational pathologies. Contrary to trends typical for the sixties and seventies, deepening inequalities signal the appearance of new social divisions in parallel with the individualization process.

This background can provide some clues for understanding current processes in Central and Eastern Europe.

Individuals in Profound Transformation

At the time Scorpions' 'Wind of Changes' was on the top of hit-parades, the blessing of new openings seemed uncontested and in the reach of everybody in Central and Eastern Europe. New biographies had to be written hastily, new norms coined and institutions established. Many cherished the hope that the key point of all the changes had to be the institutional recognition of the unrestricted development and expression of individuals. Warnings about the neglect of civilizational achievements in the region were rare (Genov 1991).

Now it is the time to look at the preliminary bottom line of the transformation. The effects of individualization are most clearly visible in the changes of legislation. The Constitution of Bulgaria passed in 1972 was a typical state socialist one. It was focused on the common good broadly understood as state owned property, political unity and national identity. But it included a number of provisions for social security of individuals as well. While taking the common good as an important point of reference, the Constitution passed in 1991 has a rather different focus. It is the issue of the individual human rights. The strategic difference between the two Constitutions exemplifies a profound change from collectivistic institutional arrangements towards institutionalized individualism. One might assume that the major problem of opening opportunities for unrestricted personal development and actualization has been thus resolved in the country.

A closer look at realities helps understanding that they are more complex and complicated than the generalized legal provisions.

Individualization under Institutional Disarray

The major factor determining the peculiarities of individualization all over Central and Eastern Europe after 1989 is the institutional instability marking the transformation process. The most fundamental problem of present day 'transitional' societies is the high intensity of risks and the often lacking institutional capability of managing them effectively. The resulting erosion of trust in public institutions is an important feature of the situation (Sztompka, 1996). This is well exemplified by the steep dispersion of answers obtained from nation-wide samples to the direct question about the efficiency of major Bulgarian Institutions:

Table 1.
The extent to which major institutions contribute to managing national problems (National surveys, five point scale, positions 1 and 5)

Institutions	To a very low extent (1)		To a very high extent (5)	
	Oct. 1994	Nov. 1996	Oct. 1994	Nov. 1996
- The Parliament	58.6	46.1	1.7	1.8
- The President	34.9	43.0	3.4	1.8
- The Government	52.4	53.4	1.4	1.1
- Law Courts and the Prosecutors' Offices	50.1	51.8	1.9	0.7

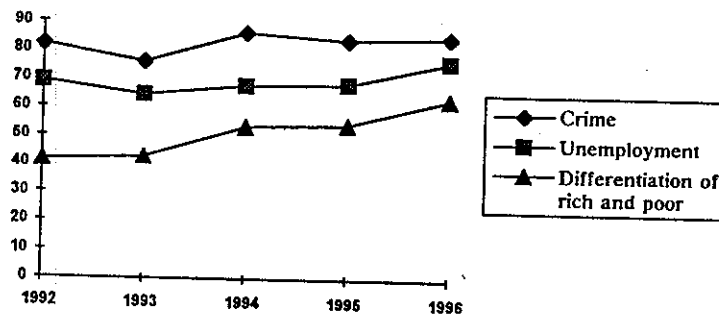
Thus, public opinion reacts adequately to the paralysis of institutions which has been experienced during the first half of the nineties. The reaction indicates what can be defined as an anomic development having numerous causes and reasons. Some of them like the world-wide economic recession at the end of the eighties and the beginning of the nineties are as objective as natural events. Others are, however, due to basically avoidable human errors or to ill-intended advice and decisions. Keeping to the Bulgarian case, crucial technological schemes in industrial cooperation were destroyed in 1990-1991. The liberalization of domestic prices and of international trade (February 1991) was guided by the illusionary hope that the "big bang" would immediately re-arrange economic relations thus unleashing private initiative and responsibility. Little thought was given to the lack of market-oriented banking system and stock exchange, insurance and pension schemes, provisions for unemployment. The restructuring of industry in terms of technological and market priorities, ownership and environmental considerations was permanently postponed. The destructive effects of the influx of subsidized agricultural products on the low-productivity national agriculture were not a matter of careful deliberation in advance. The administrative dissolution of agricultural cooperatives evolved into the illegal privatization or devastation of their assets. The expectation of a fast re-vitalization of small-scale private agriculture was unrealistic from the very beginning, the type of the available technology and infrastructure, the lack of credits and the demographic structure of the rural population. So both industry and agriculture became sources of long-term unemployment. The political reforms were carried out in a context of intensive confrontation on strategic issues. Demoralized by voluntaristic re-organizations, lacking control and low incomes, state officials at all levels lost incentives for administrative performance. Corruption became the unavoidable outcome. The economic polarization grew fast in conditions of

institutional instability and decline of the gross domestic product. Because of the rapid impoverishment of large groups and the weakening of state institutions crime became omnipresent and a genuine threat to everybody.

Against this background it is not surprising that the profound destabilization of the institutional framework of society resulted in intensive feelings of uncertainty. This might be recognized in the perception of problems facing the national society. The assessments of crime and unemployment have stable and high values over the years of transformation. Following the trend of economic polarization the concern about its effects is on the rise.

Figure 1.

Dynamics of the perception of major risks 1992-1996
(National surveys, 5 point scale, only position 5 "A very grave problem", in %)



The situation causes perplexity. How to react to the risks at the level of ultimate values? And how at the level of instrumental orientations and actions? The issue of ultimate values seems to become a crucial one under conditions in which instrumental action takes the lead. The reason is the massive disenchantment in every kind of ultimate values with the exception of some having an immediate personal relevance like health and family. As seen from this point of view the question arises: Is it possible to establish and maintain a stable social order dominated by instrumental rationality at the expense of the autonomous rationality of the ultimate ends?

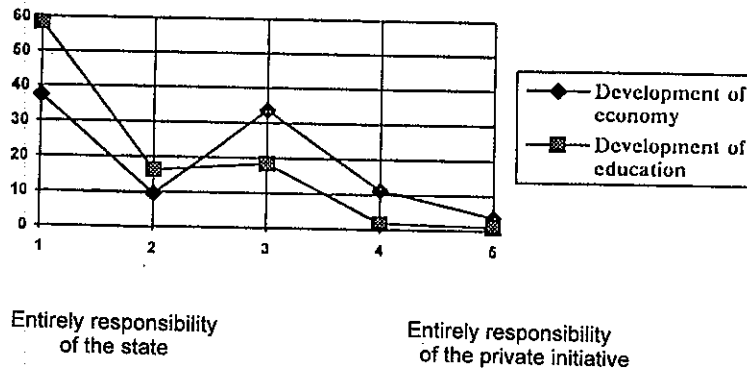
Cultural uncertainty is also maintained by contradicting processes in the very structure of values and norms. In the first half of the nineties, in parallel with private entrepreneurship and political democratization, principles of individualist ethics were quickly embraced. Their development into instrumental activity of black market and crime together with the painfully felt weakening of institutions that embody and protect the common good nurtured traditional anti-individualist attitudes. The affirmation of universal values collided with blatant instances of pursuing individual and group interests in economy and

politics. The result was a sharp clash between traditionalist and modernist, between individualist and collectivist cultural orientations.

Given the institutional and the value-normative disarray, it is not surprising that the overwhelming trend is to search for individual solutions to the severe problems confronting the majority of the population. Therefore, the dispute about the priority of the individualist American and the institutionalist Swedish model of social and economic organization seems to have been settled in favour of the former. Thus, another crucial problem arises: Can a stable social order be established and maintained by the efforts of extreme individualists? Put in other words, are the post-real-socialist societies moving from the instability of a social order dominated by the collective rationality of the national needs and goals, as it was the official ideology before 1989, to another unstable social order dominated by the rationality of the individual needs and goals?

The question has no clear answer yet. In general terms, Bulgarians long for de-regulated private initiative of the American type, on the one hand, and for a strong state regulation of the Scandinavian type. This is a typical Central and Eastern European dilemma in the mid-nineties. It is also typical that the reliance on the state involvement in major spheres of social life is strong, while the positive expectations towards the private initiative are rather weak. The deep mistrust in the state institutions that are not believed to manage the common good effectively goes hand in hand with expectations to have efficient state control on an easily accessible common good:

Figure 2.
Whose financial responsibility should be the development of economy and education? (National survey, November 1996, in %)

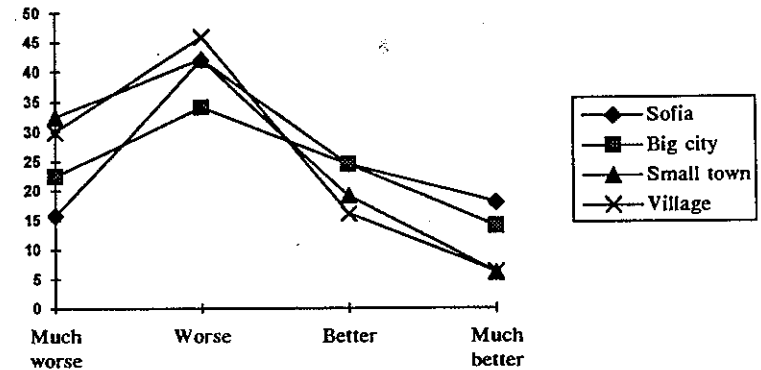


The practical problem is not primarily the illusion to paradoxically combine what cannot be achieved simultaneously. The crucial problem is that what is typically regarded as social and psychological tension, risk, uncertainty facing individuals in the original unreliability of major social institutions there. Organizations only partly manage to reduce uncertainty facing individuals in the region. The tremendous opening of potential opportunities for individualization clashes with tremendous problems in the actualization of these opportunities.

Openings and Closures

At the beginning of the period the promise was to be heard everywhere, that the country was moving from a situation, in which everybody was equally poor, to a situation, in which everybody would be well-to-do, although not to one and the same extent. Due to the economic constraints facing individuals and households, the typical assessment of life in the mid-nineties and in the late eighties is not in favour of the recent situation. The critical view is especially strong in villages and smaller towns:

Figure 3.
How do you live in June 1995 as compared to the years before 1989 (National survey, in %)



Against the background of the high level of risks facing Bulgarians in their day-to-day life, the lowering of aspirations in the personal action strategies is of a prime importance for the diagnosis of the current situation. In the context of the crisis mass ambitions are minimized. Almost every second citizen over the age of eighteen relies on a survival strategy. An important factor determining differences is the availability of more opportunities for personal initiative and realization in the large cities and especially in the capital city. Age structure also influences life strategies. They show negative trends in rural areas because of the predominantly aging population there. Despite the differences, the overall picture reveals substantial constraints on aspirations as a reflection of the limited real opportunities for choice and self-realization. Of no less concern is the time-scale of the personal strategies. The predominant personal strategy in surmounting the problems of the crisis situation is short-term. In the critical 1996 (Genov 1997) every second Bulgarian voter kept to the day-to-day survival strategy. The result displays insecurity, disorientation and, in many cases, complete helplessness.

Figure 4.
Personal life strategies - 1995 and 1996

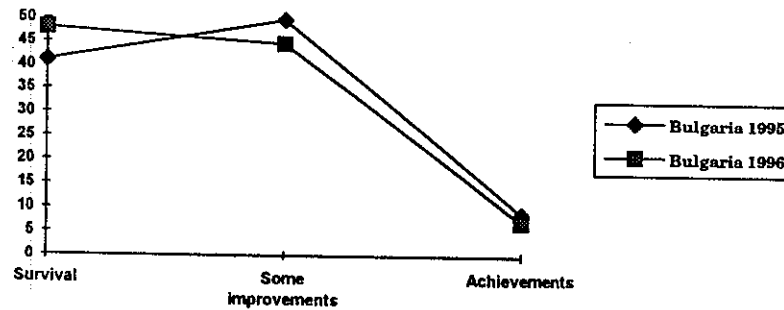
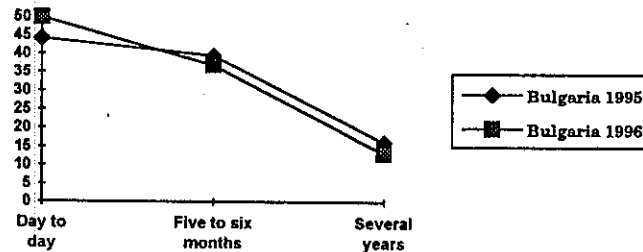


Figure 5.
Time-scale structure for personal life strategies - 1995 and 1996



So the conclusion which can be drawn from the analysis of the individualization process in a society currently undergoing profound transformation is categorical. Instead of the desired rapid expansion in the opportunities for choice before every individual, for the majority of Bulgarians these opportunities have declined. Instead of the strongly desired increase in material standards, everyday life for the majority of people is now dominated by economic insecurity and deprivations. Instead of contentment with the effectiveness of the democratic political institutions, large groups of the population are suffering from their destabilization and the resultant expansion

in crime. Instead of conditions for a higher quality of personal development, in many cases the problems of recent years have led to personal and group degradation and to destruction of the human capital of the nation. This development provides abundant evidence supporting the point that "rights, which impose demands on community members, are effectively upheld only as long as the basic needs of those community members are attended to" (Etzioni 1996: 8).

As seen from another angle, Bulgarians like the majority of Central and Eastern Europeans have proved to be unprepared to cope with the transformation. They turned out not to be able to effectively cope with the transition from a society with restricted but clearly formulated opportunities for choice, to a society in which orientation, choice and personal realization require great personal efforts in the conditions of unclear regulations and frequently of a complete lack of legislative norms. This is a typical situation in which the moral and the institutional frameworks of communal life are undermined. Using the current terminology, is not a bad foundation for their participation in the global competition. It is widely acknowledged that national developments which throw a substantial part of the population below the standards which are typical for industrialized societies has detrimental effects on the national competitive power on international scale (Brock 1994, p. 71).

The anomic developments in Central and Eastern Europe have many determinants. Some of them are directly connected with extreme and destructive forms of individualization due to unavoidable differentiation processes in economy, politics and culture. Others are due to functional disintegrations which, at least in some cases, could be avoided by well prepared and implemented organizational measures. Still others are caused by the abrupt rupture of community bonds at various levels. In the last case one may apply the diagnosis of civilizational deficiency.

Whatever the causes and reasons of the rise of extreme individualization in Central and Eastern Europe at the expense of functional integration and community bonds, it is obvious that the management of this risk factor for social life will take a rather long period. At the surface, what is to be handled appears as a value-normative problem first of all. In reality, it is mainly an organizational problem whose core is the functional disintegration. Only its reestablishment might bring about long-lasting repair to the community bonds. One can only speculate if the damages of the overhasty individualization are not irreparable.

The problem of balancing personal autonomy and community orders is so complex and complicated that it will permanently be at the very heart of social scientific and philosophical debates. One of the major reasons for the centrality of these debates is that they focus on two major trends in present day human civilization, namely the trends towards individualization and community-building. The problem of balancing botisely, a political task as well. Therefore, the theoretical importance of the above debates will be strength-

ened by their practical urgency. Many intriguing developments in both directions still lie ahead. It is a challenging task to test new options for mobilizing individuals, communities, organizations, national societies and global society for the solution of problems of sustainable development, for instance. Indeed, the prospects of integration via mobilization for risk management seems to be most promising for keeping individualization, communities and organization aside from anomy and pathologies.

Note

(1) All data stem from annual cumulative studies on Risks in Modern Society carried out by a team headed by the present author at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.

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