CHAPTER THIRTEEN

PUBLIC GOOD MORALITY IN EUROPE: AN IMPACT OF COMMUNIST RULE?

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Introduction

According to many citizens, corrosion of society and moral decay are major issues in contemporary European societies. People express concern about the decline of deference, and they complain about loose standards of decency and the loss of respect and good manners. Polls in the United Kingdom, for example, show that more than ‘four in five people believe that Britain is in moral decline’, and ‘only 9% disagreed that moral standards were falling’. Among Dutch people too, such worries are a recurring issue. The Dutch speak of a growing lack of respect, the hardening of society, antisocial behaviour and a growing ‘me culture’ (Dekker & Den Ridder, 2012: 16). This ‘Great Disruption’ as Fukuyama (2000) called it, is noticed in other countries as well, and seems to show itself in lower levels of ethical standards in virtually all European societies.

The adherents of this viewpoint assume that many people have become indifferent about moral standards. They argue that moral decay is a by-product of modernization of society in general and of processes of individualization and secularization in particular. Civic virtues are on the decline because of ‘an excessive individualism and weaker beliefs in community and the common good’ (Listhaug & Ringdal, 2004: 344). This development is regarded as cumbersome because people are increasingly ‘unable to make the moral commitments that will connect them to other people’ (Fukuyama, 2000: 48). The loss of strict rules and norms is seen to have encouraged an unbridled pursuit of selfishness and personal gain which undermines collective solidarity and citizenship and which will ultimately lead to social dissolution and isolation. Pope John Paul II warned of such a development:

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[If individuals only follow their] subjective and changeable opinion or, . . . [their own] selfish interest and whim, . . . [it will lead] to a distortion of life in society . . . [where] people inevitably reach the point of rejecting one another. Everyone else is considered an enemy from whom one has to defend oneself. Thus society becomes a mass of individuals placed side by side, but without any mutual bonds (quoted from Banner, 2007: 17).

Such a pessimistic view stresses the negative consequences of modernization, individualization and secularization, suggesting that they will eventually lead to egoistic behaviour. A more positive view on these developments emphasizes possible advantages, such as increased individual freedom, enhanced personal opportunities and a greater acceptance of diversity and disparity. Inglehart (1997), for example, argued that people have gradually become more interested in fulfilling post-materialistic wants that transcend sheer materialistic needs. Increasing levels of existential security have made people not only economically more secure, intellectually more autonomous and socially more independent (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005: 29), but also made room for new social values to emerge such as equality, democracy, creativity, self-expression, tolerance, and above all quality of life. Individualization and secularization do not necessarily lead to hedonism, egoism and impersonal relationships; they might even contribute to increasing public concern. These new values seem to encourage engagement in a wide variety of caring and community-service activities (Wuthnow, 1991; see also van Ingen, 2009) and engagement in new largely self-organizing and self-expressive forms of participation (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005: 44).

In this chapter, we investigate the moral views of people in contemporary Europe. We focus on a particular moral view, namely, public good morality, which concerns issues of tax evasion, benefit fraud and not paying one’s fare in public transport. Public good morality refers to a ‘sense of civic responsibility for the public good and thus entails obedience to rules, and honest and responsible behaviour’ (Letki, 2006: 306). Individuals who have high moral standards on this terrain have respect for legal norms and rules in a community. They emphasize the maximization of public instead of private gains and loathe corruption and free-riding behaviour, even if the chance of getting caught is low and the threat of punishment is minimal. High levels of public good morality are beneficial to society, as they make more effective governance possible (Listhaug & Ringdal, 2004). After all, these values and attitudes are prerequisites of honest and compliant behaviour (Orviska & Hudson, 2002). If citizens ‘accept state