Modernisation Theory, Income Evaluation, and the Transition in Eastern Europe

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates perceptions and evaluations of the distribution of income in Eastern Europe before (1987) and after (1992) the "velvet revolutions" of 1989. These are compared to perceptions and evaluations in the West over the same period. Following suggestions in the recent literature that the transformation process in Eastern Europe can best be interpreted as a process of ongoing modernisation, modernisation theory is adopted as the theoretical framework. Hypotheses derived from modernisation theory are tested using data stemming from the International Social Survey Programme.

1. Introduction

FROM WORLD WAR II till the end of the 1960s, modernisation theory was the pre-eminent theory of long-term societal change in Western sociology. Shortly after that time, however, this theory came under severe attack from many critics, especially neo-marxists. These critics pointed, particularly, to the empirical anomalies that this theory had to contend with. For example, instead of an assumed historical process of non-revolutionary, incremental change the late 60s and early 70s showed revolutions and wars; instead of democratisation, the spreading of dictatorship; instead of secularisation, the emergence of new religious movements (Alexander, 1994: 175). Another point of criticism, this time by non-marxists, pertained to the teleological, functionalist and historicist character of modernisation theory. Especially the central idea of this theory, for instance, that the developmental logic of industrialism impels societies on a particular course

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of change directed towards a particular end, has been criticised. Although in the 1970s modernisation theory became increasingly more sophisticated as it geared up to meet its critics, alternative explanations took over (Alexander, 1994: 176).

In recent years, however, modernisation theory has been making a remarkable come-back. The reason for this revival is that a number of social scientists have come to the conclusion that recent history and especially the transformation process of the post-communist countries in Eastern Europe could be best interpreted as a process of ongoing modernisation (Burawoy, 1992). Some of them even proclaim that modernisation theory “has recorded the long-term developments within the Eastern European area (…) long before they were empirically verifiable” (Müller, 1992: 111). For, in the 50s and the 60s modernisation theorists predicted a convergence of East and West determined by the logic of industrialism. One of their theses was that convergence would only become visible at the institutional level later on, although they already saw signs of convergence then. They were of the opinion that, in spite of severe ideological conflicts, a very broad consensus between East and West was discernible at the deeper level of fundamental values.

Others are also willing to revalue modernisation theory because its predictive powers appear to be superior to its alternatives, but are still sceptical as far as its deterministic and mechanistic nature is concerned. Although modernisation theory suggests a linear time chart depicting the modernisation process in Eastern Europe, the collapse of the social structure in Eastern Europe will, in their interpretation, cause an anomic rift in the linear development (cf. Srubar, 1994: 199-200, 217).

Srubar (1994: 199) is of the opinion that to clarify the changes during the transformation process without sacrificing the insights from modernisation theory, we have to turn our attention to the “meaning level” of the transformation process. Sztompka (1993: 86) too has argued that it is necessary to bring people back into the analysis of the transformation process. Instead of only turning our attention to “hard” institutional or organisational facts, we should pay much more attention to the “soft” factors of habits, mentalities, cultural routines. In this paper we will heed these suggestions. We will, first of all, for the sake of brevity, narrow down the topic of this paper to changes in the occupational structure in Eastern Europe and the changes in social inequality contingent upon it. We will, secondly, focus on subjective aspects of these changes, and especially on the perceptions and evaluations of the apportionment of income to occupations and the resulting overall distribution of income. For the sake of interpretation we will compare our findings for two industrialised, post-communist countries (Hungary and Poland) with findings drawn from four industrialised, liberal countries in the West (Australia, Great Britain, USA, West-Germany). This paper is an attempt to acquire an understanding of what notions, more specifically perceptions and evaluations, people formed of the apportionment and distribution of income in Eastern Europe before (1987) and after (1992) the “velvet revolutions” of 1989,