BELVEDERE
MERIDIONALE
TÖRTÉNELEM ÉS TÁRSADALOMTUDOMÁNYOK XXVI. ÉVFOLYAM, 4. SZÁM

Viewpoints, Perspectives

EDITOR OF THE THEMATIC ISSUE: PÁSZKA, IMRE

– MMXIV WINTER –

Cím / Title:
Critical Theory and Political Socialization

Szerző / Author:
Sik, Domonkos

SIK, DOMONKOS

sikdom@gmail.com   DOI 10.14232/belv.2014.4.4

Critical Theory and Political Socialization[1]

Abstract   The paper explores the relevance of critical theories of modernity in the research of memory transmission and political socialization. Firstly, the relevant concepts of Habermas, Giddens and Bourdieu are overviewed. Secondly, the notion of political culture and memory transmission are reinterpreted from the perspective of these theories, revealing different sources and forms of radicalism. Finally, divergent constellations of modernization are reintroduced as the broadest context of the processes of political formation.

KEYWORDS   Habermas, Bourdieu, Giddens, political socialization, memory transmission
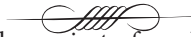
European identity is based on the project of modernization, including both emancipatory and pathological tendencies. In times of economic and identity crises, the distortion of democratic culture is inarguably amongst the most dangerous potentials threatening the whole European project of modernity. As the 2014 elections of the European Parliament indicate, the strengthening of the far right is an increasing tendency throughout Europe. As far right semantics are often inconsistent with basic democratic principles, from this perspective it does not seem to be an exaggeration to claim that European modernization is in danger. In this situation, a diagnosis of times has to reflect on the future of democratic culture which is the political socialization of young people including the formation of the perception of the political sphere, the interpretation of the historical traumas of totalitarian systems and the consequent democratic, radical or passive behaviour patterns. However, such ambitious project has a specific challenge: it requires the connection of critical theories of modernization with empirical researches of political socialization. The following paper makes a such attempt.

Most critical theories of modernity do not focus on the process of political socialization; instead, they rely on theoretical models of political formation. The empirical researches of political formation rarely build on critical 'grand theories' as well, but they examine the transmission of collective memory and the effect of the agents of socialization, the family, the institutions and the peer groups. Accordingly, the connection of the two fields requires elaboration. First of all, the actors' understanding of politics and history need to be embedded into the other aspects of the socially constructed reality. Secondly, political activism or passivism needs to be redefined in the context of other activities. Thirdly, all these issues need to be conceptualized in a dynamic model, capable of grasping those specific factors which explain their transformation. Only such contextualization can reveal those specific patterns of social integration that result in radicaliza-

---

[1] The writing of this paper was supported by the project MYPLACE (FP7- 266831). See http://www.fp7-myplace.eu/

tion, democratic engagement or turning away from the public sphere. In order to contextualize the interpretation of the world and acting in the world in a dynamic model, we need to rely on social theories that do not only operate on phenomenological and structural level, but are also capable of highlighting the historical dynamics, in other words the theoretical modernization aspect of these transformations.

Very few theories are capable of such complex task. I have chosen Habermas, Bourdieu and Giddens to highlight some important dimensions of a social theoretical model of modernization in a critical manner. I hope that from these theories, new perspectives and ideas can be deduced, which can help us to determine a theoretical frame of understanding the relation of divergent paths of modernization and different forms of radicalism. Firstly, I introduce how these theories describe the phenomenological and action theoretic level of social integration and the consequences of modernization. Then I summarize the conclusions of these theories for a theory of political socialization.

The Frames of Understanding and Acting in Modernity

Social theories originating from the Weberian tradition argue that the key of social integration is a common interpretation of the world, which frames the potential means, norms and ends in other words, the horizon of action. According to the phenomenological tradition – from Schütz to Habermas – this interpretation is called the „lifeworld" (meaning "the world, as it is experienced") and it is constructed in those action situations where mutual understanding is not pre-given, thus social action is hindered. In these moments of dissent, the actors are forced to reflect on their understanding of the world and potentially renew it. While Schütz describes this reflection as an individual process, according to Habermas the renewal of the lifeworld happens via linguistic interactions. One of the most important consequences of this shift is the chance to evaluate the processes of the renewal of lifeworld from the perspective of rationality and morality. Individual cognitive processes are not transparent, so they cannot be evaluated from the position of the observer, but speech acts can be indeed evaluated.

Those speech acts which are potentially criticized by the hearer and if needed justified by the speaker are rational in the sense that their series enables the triumph of the best argument. However, those speech acts which are beyond criticism or are maintained despite the inability of justification refer to distortions caused by unequal power relations. As communication occurs in an interpersonal space, it is based on moral foundations: the order of justification is embedded into the moral perspectives of the actors, which can be either preconventional (based on the raw power or private interests), conventional (based on roles or norms), or postconventional (based on the recognition of the other as "an end in itself"). In this sense socialization, the rationality of lifeworld and the moral development are linked to each other: a rational lifeworld free of dogmatic meanings may be constructed in the series of undistorted interactions based on mutual recognition.

In contrast, sociological theories originating from the Durkheimian argue that the key of social integration is a system of social facts which enforces predefined tracks of action independently from the actors' interpretations. These systematic forces are described since Parsons and Luhmann as symbolically generalized communication mediums. They coordinate social actions by defining automatized tracks of communication (e.g. money, law etc.). These tracks allow a substantively very limited communication (e.g. buy/ sell, legal/ illegal etc.), but provide

the opportunity of generalized communication. This means that anyone familiar with the given medium, independently from the mutual understanding with the potential partners may rely on the functioning of the systems. In this sense, according to the Habermasian theory, understanding can be modelled on three interrelated levels of the unreflected lifeworld, the social reflection of speech acts and the systematized mediums.

Habermas describes modernization according to this conceptual frame. He argues that the fundamental process is the rationalization of communication and lifeworld. This means a parallel learning process on the level of the moral frames of communication, a more reflective relation to lifeworld, the decrease of the proportion of dogmatic meanings and an increase of argumentative debates. As a consequence of these transformations, the need for mediatised action coordination also grows high. The rationalized lifeworld allows the emergence of abstract, generalized communication mediums which can effectively integrate mass societies. However, the uncontrolled expansion of system integration results in a paradox trend of modernization. The replacement of speech acts by mediums ('colonization') endangers the reproduction of the same lifeworld which enables the emergence of systems. This tendency is the self-destructive potential of modernization, threatening with alienation, anomie, loss of meaning, legitimation, motivational and educational crises or psychopathologies (Habermas 1984, 1987, 1990).

While Habermas moves to the direction of highlighting the interactive capacities of reflection, Giddens relies on the reflective capacities of the actors themselves and their interactions with the institutional environment. According to him, at least three different levels of the agent can be differentiated. The most fundamental is the level of unconscious motivations, including the existential wish for ontological security that is the basic wish for a meaningful, inhabitable life. The second level is the practical consciousness which organizes the everyday action situations. The third is the reflexive/discursive consciousness which is responsible of strategic decisions and the supervising of practical consciousness. Understanding of the world can be characterized on these levels. Fundamentally, it is determined by existential needs which means that every interpretative process has an implicit existential level. It is never 'objective', as ontological security and identity are always at stake. Secondly, the understanding of the world is shaped and reshaped by the actors, who not only follow the structural forces or the personal routines, but continuously monitor themselves, the others and their institutional environment. In this process they rely on the available discursive resources produced by the experts of different areas. As a result of these process of understanding, institutionalized structures emerge which continuously interact with the potentials of actors as a frame of future processes. In this sense and according to the Giddensian theory, understanding can be modelled as a circulation of personal reflection and institutional reflection, complemented with unconscious existential motivations (Giddens 1984).

Giddens analyses modernization from this perspective. According to his diagnosis, the fundamental process of modernization is the transformation of the relation of actors and institutions. While the first period of modernity created its own authority based on positivist scientific knowledge, this authority has also been the target of serious criticism in late modernity. As a consequence, expert institutions lost their self-evident legitimacy, the trust in science and politics have been lost, risk and contingency became general. These transformations put extra burden on the actors. Not only did they need more intensive reflective activity to handle the new contingencies, but also the contours of identity became blurred and ontological security became unsure. In order to handle these challenges, the actors need to navigate better in the jungle of public sphere to find those narratives which can help their reflection. In addition, they need to develop skills and competences which allow them to establish intimate relationships and invent

individualized life courses capable of grounding and maintaining self-identity. The unsuccessful handling of all these challenges may result not only in subordinated socio-economic position, but also psychopathologies (such as dependencies) or attempts to collectively reject late modernity in the form of political fundamentalisms (Giddens 1990. 1991).

Unlike Habermas and Giddens, who both approach to the problem of understanding from the perspective of the interacting or the individual agent, Bourdieu's starting point is the structure of inequalities. According to him, different spheres of social practices ('fields') are inevitably unequal, as the definition of the rules of the spheres ('illusions') is inevitably arbitrary. As the act of defining is necessarily a zero sum game (either I define or someone else), fields are necessarily battlegrounds of competing interests. The winner of these fights gains the right to define the illusion and to control its engraving into the actors themselves ('symbolic violence'). Legitimate orders and interpretations of the world are always the result of successfully veiled power relations in this sense; this is why they are by definition illusive. Of course, the power distortions are rarely explicit, especially as they are incorporated not only on the level of reflected or unreflected intentions, but on the level of dispositions ('habitus') as well. The habitus in this sense is the preintentional understanding of the world, expressing the position in the different fields. In sum, according to the Bourdieuian theory, understanding of the world can be modelled as being necessarily distorted by veiled inequalities which results in partly conscious interpretations (illusion) and unconscious (habitus) dispositions.

For Bourdieu, modernity is not a separate theme; he admittedly analyzes modern (French) society and does not necessarily want to extrapolate trends from his observations. Accordingly, his ideas on modernity can be deduced from the empirical works. One of his central observations is the reproduction of inequalities through hidden mechanisms. Not the reproduction, but its hiddenness is something genuinely modern: the replacement of the raw power relations to seemingly legitimate hierarchies and the naturalization of inequalities. Even if these inequalities reproduce themselves in great extent, they do not at all result in a static society, as the more advantageous positions are continuously challenged from below and independent fields are continuously tried to be detached from the existing ones. These are the main dynamizing factors of modernity: newer and newer illusions emerge, as those in privileged position, in aspiring middle position and in defeatist or revolting subordinated position confront each other and attack or defend the existing order of fields. In this constellation, there are no clear emancipatory or pathological tendencies, only the inevitable logic of modern class struggle that overlap material and symbolic fields as well (Bourdieu 1984, 1992, 1998).

Passivism, Radicalism and Democratic Culture in Modernity

These different models provide the opportunity to conceptualize collective memories, political intentions and behaviour patterns as an aspect of everyday actions. In this way, the preconditions of an activist, a passive or a radical political culture can be understood from the perspective of the complexity of life, not only in a theoretically reduced way. The different social theoretical models emphasize different aspects of the modern society which in many ways complement each other. These models together highlight the contours of late modern conditions which can be used as a general frame of explanation.

The Habermasian model is exceptional in the sense that it is explicitly based on a democratic value choice. At the heart of the theory, there is a normative concept of undistorted communication which can be used as an analytical tool of evaluating the democratic quality of the

processes of social integration, cultural reproduction and socialization. If the speech acts are distorted – that is instead of argumentative debate explicit or implicit power relations define the interpretation of the world –, then a dogmatic lifeworld is reproduced. Dogmatic meanings imply antidemocratic social relations as they cannot be justified; only forced on others. Accordingly, with the Habermasian approach collective memories, political intentions and behaviour patterns can be analyzed from the perspective of the rationality and morality of interactions. Political culture is formed in every communicative process in which young people are involved, independently from the topic of the discussion. Depending on the rationality and morality of the communicative processes, participants may experience freedom and democratic social relations or lack these impressions. As these experiences are the ground and precondition of the substantive democratic values (e.g. tolerance, solidarity etc.), the everyday communicative process play a crucial role in the formation of an activist, a passive or a radical actor.

According to Habermas, the tendencies of modernization imply ambiguous consequences for the chance of undistorted communication. On the one hand, an ongoing moral learning process provides better and better opportunity for undistorted communication and the rationalization of the lifeworld. On the other hand, the expansion of mediated communication narrows the space of linguistic interpretation of the world as such. In this sense, modernization is a potential and a danger at the same time for democratic formation. Both under- and overrationalization of the lifeworld holds the potential of opening up space for radicalization. This means that only such social constellation is capable of overcoming these difficulties which balances between the two types of trespass successfully: fosters communicative rationalization, while controls the system expansion. In this process of balancing, collective memory plays a crucial role. It is a substantive dimension of lifeworld, framing collective identity through the examples of the past. In those cases where these examples include reference to either the under- (e.g. traumas caused by dogmatic ideologies) or the overrationalization of lifeworld (e.g. crises of over-bureaucratization), the chances of avoiding their pathologies is higher. That is why young people's interpretation of collective memory plays a crucial role in the formation of political culture. The identification with its under- or overmodernizing narratives – in a dogmatic and a technocrat way – opens up space for antidemocratic political culture.

According to Giddens' model, political culture can be understood through the interaction of actors motivated by unconscious, practical and reflected drives and institutions characterized by the reflective capacities of experts. The democratic quality of social situation can be evaluated based on this model. If the actors have a chance to ensure their ontological security, construct their identity and have a mutually satisfying reflexive relation with their institutional environment, then there is no systematic obstacle to the emergence of an active democratic civic culture. However, if any element of this constellation becomes problematic that could affect the political culture as well. If ontological security is unsure that may result in anxiety and frustrations which provide fertile ground for radicalization. If reflective capacities are not acquired that may result in disadvantage not only in material sense, but also in the processes of identity formation which make actors susceptible for populist ideologies. If the institutions and experts are not reflective or not cooperative enough that may result in structural inequalities, alienation and psychological pathologies, which open up the space for cognitive or emotional radicalization.

As Giddens describes the main trends of modernization, on all these levels serious challenges emerge. The ensuring of ontological security becomes more and more difficult as risks and contingency grow, while trust in others and in institutions weakens. With the individuali-

zation of life courses, identity formation becomes a personal task requiring not only reflexive, but interactive capacities as well. With the weakening of the authority of the expert knowledge, institutions are burdened with the augmented task of justify their legitimacy. This task can be done only by adapting to the individualized needs of the actors which requires significant reflexive improvement. These challenges imply various attempts of overcoming whose success remains contingent as the speed of social transformation accelerates and new crisis appear. This contingency has particularly disturbing consequences for the chances of democratic culture, as the emergence of democratic culture depends not only on the success of one of these attempts, but on the parallel success of all of them. The different failures of overcoming the different challenges of modernization open up different paths of radicalization which needs to be distinguished in order to understand the complexity of the emergence of antidemocratic political cultures.

Collective memories may play important role in the attempts of overcoming the challenges of radicalization. They can be defined in the interaction of actors and institutions: memories are expert knowledge being evaluated by the reflection of the actors. Both traumatic memories and positive examples can be used for supporting the attempts of overcoming the challenges of modernity, i.e. fostering democratic socialization (e.g. if they include narratives of successful transformations). Or they can be used as a retrograde source, which legitimize radical or fundamentalist worldviews (e.g. if they emphasize the failures of modernity).

Similarly to Habermas' model, Bourdieu's is also fundamentally political, although not in an idealistic, but in an extremely suspicious fashion. In the Bourdieuian approach, the problems of political culture are embedded into the context of structural inequalities. Politics is on the one hand an autonomous field, with autonomous rules and capital. On the other hand it is the general model of the functioning of any other fields, in which the actors continuously naturalize the inequalities through the mechanisms of symbolic violence. According to this approach, democratic culture itself is an illusion which is maintained, transformed and instrumentalized by those in privileged position, in order to legitimize the inequalities and fight field struggles. This of course does not nullify those democratic values which have been crystallized since the Enlightenment. It rather highlights those practices whose unintended consequences create them and those structural constellations which maintain them. From this perspective, we may argue that democratic habitus and illusions require first of all autonomous fields, having if not equal, but measurable powers. Also such habitus and illusion require relatively balanced power inequalities within the fields. Democratic values are defended and maintained only if there is a space where they can be effectively used and there are actors who are interested in using them. The former is ensured by the independence of economic, political, public sphere, scientific, artistic etc. fields. The latter is ensured by actors who – unintentionally, while fighting their own field struggles – are interested and willing to fight in the name of democratic values.

Modernization in Bourdieu's approach does not have a specific substantive trend. It is an open process in the sense that its substantive characteristics depend on the concrete struggles within and between fields. Accordingly, the potentials of democratization are also open in modernity: as inequalities and imbalanced power relations grow high, the chances of democratic socialization decrease, as the relation between and within fields are balanced, the space of democratic illusions and habitus increases. Of course this includes not only the macro level of fields, but also those smaller circles which surround the agents in everyday situations. If there are space and resources for criticism of dominant illusions in these everyday relations, democratic socialization has better chances. Collective memories in Bourdieuian context can be defined as

instrumentalized discourses which are affected by the field struggles. Their significance comes from their capacity of framing the attempts of these struggles. As they can either be effectively used in order to centralize power and increase inequalities, or to decentralize power and decrease inequalities, the control over their definition is always amongst the central stakes of the struggles.

Multiple Modernities, Multiple Radicalisms

The above described models outline different conceptual frames of analyzing social phenomena and different diagnosis of modernity. Even if these models were created with the claim of universality, they clearly carry the trace of the specific socio-historical constellations of their birth. This means that even if the diagnoses can be applied to any other socio-historical constellations, they are not equally relevant in every case. Therefore, probably it is the wisest, if we treat these models as the descriptions of the different aspects of the same process of modernization. European modernization is constituted of significantly different constellations of modernization within each country. These constellations can be described from the perspectives of Habermas', Giddens' and Bourdieu's theory, and reveal those specific pathologies and emancipatory potentials which frame the processes of political formation on the most general level.

By distinguishing between constellations of modernization, first of all we may reveal potential causes for radicalization. In those cases where communicative rationalization is challenged, the potential sources of radicalization are dogmatic meanings and distorted interpersonal relations. In those cases where communicative rationalization is overextended and mediated, communication replaces linguistic communication, radicalization can be explained with the dissolution of the space of moral and democratic experiences. In those cases where ontological security is unsure, radicalization may be tracked back to affective causes such as frustration and anxiety. In those cases where reflexive capacities are unsatisfactory, radicalization can be explained with incapability of dealing with the augmented level of risk and the challenges of identity formation. In those cases where institutions are not reflexive, radicalization may be deduced to legitimacy or functional crises. In those cases where – between or within fields – structural inequalities are extremely high, radicalization may be explained with the lack of space of democratic illusions and habitus.

In this sense, modernization constellations constitute a distinct level of analysis along with those levels which usually appear in empirical researches of political socialization, namely the memory reproduction and the individual factors of political socialization. These different levels interact with each other in the sense that not only the modernization constellation affects collective memory production and the individual processes of political socialization, but also these latter levels affect modernization. Traumas or positive historical examples may ground collective identities which support either pathological or emancipatory processes. The individual processes of political socialization may also result in actors either capable or incapable of overcoming the challenges of different modernization constellations. The following figure summarizes these relations:

The inclusion of the level of modernization theories into the analysis of the formation of political culture can be justified by both normative and scientific reasons. Social theories of modernization are capable of clarifying the broadest normative stakes which is none other than the European project of modernity. From modernization theoretical perspective, radicalization can be defined as a crisis symptom of modernity, the sign of insufficient handling of the
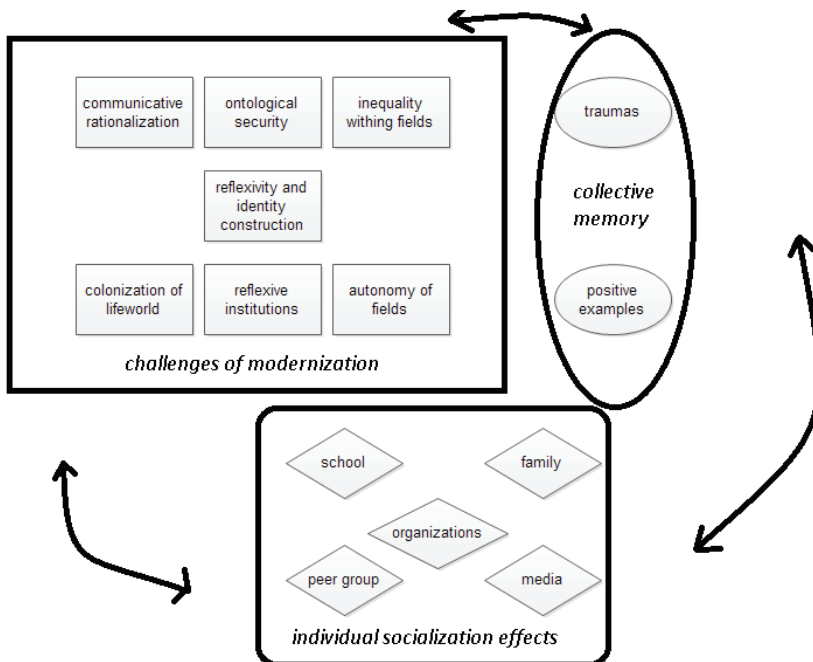
Figure 1 ❖ *Framing political socialization*

challenges of modernization, the indicator of new types of pathologies and the need for new emancipatory methods. If radicalism is the crisis symptom of modernity, then different aspects of modernity potentially imply different types of radicalization. These types require different frames of explanation which are provided by social theories of modernity. Furthermore, to understand radicalization on a European level, a 'common denominator' is needed that is a common ground to compare the different phenomena of radicalism. Social theories of modernity provide such ground as well, as they reinterpret the national cases as different constellations of modernity.

In sum, critical theories of modernity and empirical researches of political socialization are interdependent: while the former indicate the stakes of political formation and provide analytical tools for its analysis, the latter provides empirical evidence for the diagnosis of times.   ✳

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BOURDIEU, PIERRE (1984): *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press.

BOURDIEU, PIERRE (1992): *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* with Loïc Wacquant. Cambridge, University of Chicago Press and Polity.

BOURDIEU, PIERRE (1998): *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*, Stanford, Stanford University Press.

GIDDENS, ANTHONY (1984): *The Constitution of Society. Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. Oxford, Polity Press.

GIDDENS, Anthony (1990): *The Consequences of Modernity*. Stanford, Stanford University Press

Giddens, Anthony (1991): *Modernity and Self-Identity. Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge, Polity Press.

HABERMAS, JÜRGEN (1984): *The Theory of Communicative Action*. Volume 1. Boston, Beacon Press.

HABERMAS, JÜRGEN (1987): *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Volume 2. Boston, Beacon Press.

HABERMAS, JÜRGEN (1990): '*Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*'. Cambridge, Polity Press.