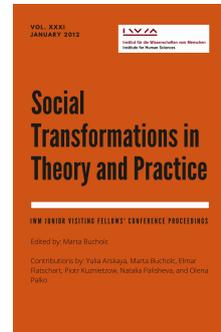


Multiple Facets of Social Change

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IWM Junior Visiting Fellows' Conference Proceedings, Vol. XXXI ©
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Introduction

This volume joins a long series of works on social transformation emerging in Central and Eastern Europe. It has become a cliché to imagine social sciences in this region as primarily, and somewhat narcissistically, interested in the transformation processes currently in place in most of the CEE countries. Nevertheless, it seems that the interest of Central and Eastern Europeans in social transformation is perhaps less self-explanatory than it might seem at first sight. Moreover, it is also not quite as self-centered now as it used to be in the early eighties.

From a certain perspective, it is in many ways understandable that the phenomenon of social transformation is a subject of keen reflection amongst people who have witnessed it with their own eyes. Since times immemorial, our part of the world has been subject to deep and far-reaching metamorphoses which account for both the Protean identity of many peoples in our region and for the palimpsest nature of the space we live in, both the natural and the symbolic one. In such circumstances, it would seem only natural to expect the two following effects: a deep local exceptionalism and a certain routine in perceiving social change as a matter of course and not as an event breaking the monotony of social reproduction. In the past decades (and especially in the period after World War II) the output and lives of many thinkers coming from Central and Eastern Europe have given evidence both of the originality of this localized approach to social change and of its usefulness for scholars representing different traditions, in particular those coming from the Anglo-Saxon world.

However, this very domestication of social change and transformation might also result in a growing *désintéressement* caused by the current fatigue with the transformation problem as it has been present in public and scientific discourses of recent decades in many of our countries. Sometimes it does seem that everything has already been said and done as far as social transformation is concerned: dominant theoretical approaches have

been applied and exploited, political, social, cultural and psychological consequences traced, historical underpinnings denuded and depicted; not much is left to be done. Misleading and inaccurate as this vision may be, it seems that CEE fascination with social transformation has reached its saturation level and is now in a phase of decline. Refreshment is called for at present and there are quite a few strategies of providing it, as is demonstrated by the choices of the contributors to this volume.

One of the most popular strategies to sustain the interest in social transformation nowadays is to shift the research focus beyond the regions traditionally within sight of European social sciences. The leading subject of research in this area is of course the quickly growing body of postcolonial studies, focusing on social change in the societies which have traditionally been disregarded in 19th- and early 20th-century social change discourses, including the most popular one on modernization. The interest in postcolonial development coincides with the growing importance of the issue of globalization and the increasing weight of certain former colonies in global politics, economics and demography. India is, of course, one of the most pertinent examples in this regard, and it is noticeable nowadays that the traditional (although elitist at the best of times) Western fascination with Indian culture, religion and philosophy is spreading into non-Western countries and less familiar social and political contexts. The first article in the present volume, by Natalia Palisheva, on the influence of the global context on the perception of the sources of social inequality in India may well be seen as exemplifying this turn. The issue of social transformation is taken here as a correlate of the changes in Indian social and political ideas produced by the elites of the colonial period. Thereby one of the main theses of transformation theory is confirmed, namely the proposition that changes in the spheres of culture and mentality correspond to shifts in social structure and in the political system.

Our next contributor, Yulia Arskaya, also chose to focus on symbolic representations of social change, although her main point of interest is literature and the way it reflects attitudes towards the changing social and political reality. In her discussion of the deconstruction of totalitarianism in Russian and German postmodernist literature, Yulia Arskaya adopts a comparative approach on two levels. Firstly, she compares two national literatures in which the problem of totalitarianism became an important point of reference, one that served to filter a similar experience through divergent cultural traditions. Secondly, she reads contemporary postmodern approaches as interpretations of the totalitarian past of both Russia and Germany, thus inevitably making the present a mirror of the past. Thus, she pursues yet another strategy of giving fresh appeal to transformation studies in CEE: redirecting attention to current interpretations of the historical experience of Central and Eastern European societies as a context of shaping our contemporary views on social change.

Olena Palko continues the line of historical research into social transformation processes, focusing on a particularly difficult period in Ukrainian history, namely the struggle for domination between the national communists and the adherents of Soviet rule. Olena Palko aims to show the difficulties (both ideological and practical ones) of being Ukrainian among communists, illustrating on the Ukrainian case the more general

problems attendant on the establishment of Soviet authority in new Soviet republics, including in particular the policy towards non-Russian nationalities. Traditional problems of nationality and ethnicity are thus put in the context of universal mechanisms of imperial politics. At the same time, the political and ideological dimension of the various turns in the Soviet approach to Ukrainian nationalist aspirations within the communist movement serves as an example of a more general process of power struggle between majority and minority forces in which ideological considerations play a secondary role.

Unlike the first three contributions to this volume, which demonstrate various empirical strategies and approaches to the problem of social change, the last two papers pertain to changes within science (and, in particular, social science) itself and are decidedly theoretical in character. A crucial point is thus made: the development of science must not be seen in abstraction from the problems of social change, just as social change is a common term denoting a wide range of processes, amongst which the shifts in scientific theoretical approaches should also be taken into account.

Elmar Flatschart, with his review of critical realism as a new proposition of critical dialectics for the social sciences, touches upon two significant issues in 20th-century social sciences: the decreasing importance of philosophical tools in scientific reasoning and, as one of its manifestations, the decline of dialectics in applied social sciences. Elmar Flatschart argues that by mediating critical realism (as a philosophical tool) and critical theory (as a tradition in social sciences) we may find a useful instrument for dealing with inherent social contradictions. This belief is not limited to the quest for a solution of theoretical problems in social science. Finding a conceptual model that allows us to understand our lives better is vitally important for the well-being of society, of which social science is an integral part – perhaps the most reflective one.

The development of social sciences and its relation to social change, understood as a process of constant reflection on the previous states of social (including scientific) imagery, is the subject matter of the last contribution by myself. I discuss the metaphor of climbing the stairs of a tower used by Norbert Elias, taking it as an image of the constantly changing state of human knowledge of the world. In the metaphor of the climb, science and society are shown as interrelated and interdependent for their progress. I analyze the interpretative potential of social change, its snares and its opportunities, as depicted by this metaphor. I argue that abandoning the idea of progress in its Enlightenment form with no substitute presenting itself may have deprived us of any plausible framework within which we might express our hope for a better future. Elias's ideal of science, one of the most indigenous products of Central European mentality, strives to restore hope without giving up on scientific detachment, which makes it a valuable supplement to Elias's vision of the civilizing process.

The civilizing process in Central and Eastern Europe has always been noticeable and – so to say – palpable in comparison to those regions and areas whose history followed a more benign and straighter line. Nevertheless, this natural focus on social change, its conditions and consequences is currently undergoing a deep metamorphosis: we are looking for new perspectives from which to evaluate our situation, we are inventing new comparative contexts, both synchronic and diachronic ones; we are expanding the field of our interest

in transforming societies beyond the traditional Western space and paradigms. Whether we do it with a view to enhancing the understanding of our own situation or whether we actually try to overcome the limitations of a regional focus which might from time to time become a burden, is immaterial insofar as any effort better to understand any part of social reality contributes to the general movement of climbing the stairs towards a real conscience of our condition.

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Preferred citation: Bucholc, Marta. 2012. Multiple Facets of Social Change. Introduction. In: *Social Transformations in Theory and Practice*, ed. M. Bucholc, Vienna: IWM Junior Visiting Fellows’ Conferences, Vol. 31.