

Generations of Change: Understanding Post Socialism and Transition Processes from a Generational Perspective

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Introduction

1989 marks a break of historical continuity: a big part of the “socialist world” disappeared with the collapse of the Soviet regime. Social science immediately started to observe and analyse a phenomenon described as the “transformation process” or the “transition” labelling the social circumstances in those countries as “post socialism”. Quickly new terms were invented within the interplay of the academic and political field referring to the post socialist world by (re-)creating national and regional boundaries such as “the Baltics”, “Central Eastern Europe”, “Southern Eastern Europe” and labelling the states as hyphenated constructs, i.e. the diverse “Ex’s” and “Posts” and “Formers”.

In fact, when social scientists deal with (transformation) societies they usually tend to engage with nation states. We aim to enhance this geopolitical determination in favour of a social generational perspective. The above mentioned approaches compiled a profound knowledge of the specificities of the newly emerged nation states and regional entities, for instance the Visegrad Four, who formed the core of what nowadays is widely defined as Central Eastern Europe or the so called Baltic states. (cf. Andorka 1997, Meisselwitz, Segert 1997, Roobol 1999) Nevertheless an approach which goes beyond the redrawn borders within the former Socialist space and focuses on generations and age cohorts of people, who were somehow all affected by the same political, social and cultural regime and its breakdown, can spot new light on transformation processes. Not only those common characteristics of all former socialist states (e.g. restricted freedom of action and movement) impacted people’s lives similarly; maybe even more crucial is the shared experience of system breakdown and system change and the aftermath.

In our plenary conference we want to raise the question of how different generations on the one hand experience and on the other hand foster system change. For this purpose different

case studies will be brought together, that focus on social change after 1989 in the fields of economy, politics and socio-cultural life. It is not necessary that the research design of those studies applies a generational approach itself. Rather the aim of the conference is to bring together up-and-coming researchers from different disciplines in order to comprehend by the example of their studies how system change and social, economical, political and cultural mechanisms can be understood from the generational perspective. Therefore, the applying projects should show a clear applicability as to the purpose of the conference. Furthermore the accepted candidates are required to become acquainted with the Mannheimian theory on generations in case this precondition is not met yet. We will provide an overview of relevant literature. The accepted presentations shall link the theoretical approach of the conference and the participants' own empirical data.

State of research

Already in 2002 the anthropologists Chris Hann, Katherine Verdery and Caroline Humphrey raised the question of if "post socialism" respectively "post socialist" still was an appropriate category to describe the social circumstances and ways of life in the former socialist countries in Europe and Asia. Since 2000 some interdisciplinary studies have doubted the power of explanation of this concept. Nevertheless, the assumption seems untenable that social realities of the socialist societies disappear abruptly and can be entirely replaced by new realities. The notion "post socialist" will remain relevant as long as ideals, ideologies and practices of socialism serve people as a reference point for the perception and evaluation of the contemporary present and for their everyday practices. (Hann 2002: 7) As the Polish sociologist Piotr Sztompka stated, "it is a truism that all societies are path-dependent, shaped by their particular history and tradition. Earlier events leave traces and imprints – in material infrastructure, in institutions and in memories." (Sztompka 2007:22)

Humphrey argues that the strong impact of the socialist past on people's political judgements in the former socialist zone cannot be ignored. Thus, people's expectations about the future are not only determined by contemporary experiences after 1989. According to Humphrey, this socialist imprinting will assumingly lose its effective power only in the course of generational change. (Humphrey 2002: 29)

Humphrey's accentuation of the factor of generations in the research of social change sounds convincing. As in many other studies the author unfortunately does not deepen the knowledge

of generation's specific attitudes towards social change by thoroughly pursuing the theoretical implications and empirical premises of the generational approach. Thereby the question to what extent the category "post socialism" still had explanatory power to describe the social dynamics after 1989 is answered rather intuitively. However, there are some noticeable exceptions, which systematically apply a generational approach in order to analyse transitional processes in East Germany and Russia. (c.f. Ahbe/Gries 2006, Bürgel 2006, Wohlrab-Sahr / Karstein / Schmidt-Lux 2009)

The suggested conjunction between the dynamics of social change in former Socialist countries and the generational approach is intriguing. By applying this approach on case studies presented in our plenary conference, we intend to shed light on the interrelation between social change and generational change.

Theoretical approach

We start with the assumption that societal changes and dynamics can be understood more comprehensively if the analytical framework focuses on the tensions between the involved age cohorts, generations and their actors. (cf. Burkhart, Wolf 2002: 421) Crucial for generational studies is the understanding that cohorts must not be equated with generation. However, a closer look at cohorts often indicates useful hints to the formation of cultural/social generations, which have to be reconstructed regarding their mechanisms of distinction against preceding generations. (Wohlrab-Sahr 2002:216) This analytical distinction between generation and cohort was one of the essential achievements of Karl Mannheim's sociology of knowledge as elaborated in his famous article "Das Problem der Generationen", first published in 1928. Mannheim develops the analytical categories of generational location (Generationslagerung), generational cohesion (Generationszusammenhang) and generational unit (Generationseinheit). In the Mannheimian sense generation is no concrete social group, rather generation is a social location that has the potential to affect an individual's consciousness alike social class. Generational location is determined by the biological cycle e.g. date of birth and death and the belonging to one social historical space at the same time. This common generational location has the potential to affect the individual's consciousness by experiencing the same historical events at the same age. Only the binding element of participation at shared historical destinies constitutes a generational cohesion. (Mannheim 1970)

We conceive the former socialist zone as a socio-historical space, in which certain cohorts experienced the events of 1989 and the aftermath. Therefore it can be suggested that in the post socialist societies distinctive generational cohesions can be carved out i.e. people's lives are affected similarly by the comprehensive social reorganisations. For example system transformation meant for the older generation the reconstruction of the labour market, whereas the younger ones "just" had to cope with the reconstruction of the educational system. German historian Rainer Gries for instance has demonstrated by the example of East Germany that age and corresponding phases of life have an impact on experiences that may express themselves as generation-specific expectations and orientations at a given historico-political occasion. Historical events, cultural or technical developments assemble specific age groups in such a way that they constitute communities of shared experiences, which at times can exist beyond educational level, income and political orientations. (Ahbe/Gries 2006) Similarly a recently published study has pointed out, that young Russians that have not experienced socialism themselves feel set apart from foregoing Russian generations born and raised during Soviet times. This "generational gap" is fostered by the profound change of norms and values since the breakdown of the Soviet regime. Therefore, Russian juveniles, being raised under conditions of the instabilities of transformation, often feel uncertain und confused about their future. (Dafflon 2009) It can thus be hypothesized that regarding dynamics of transition a generational perspective case-by-case has a higher explanatory ability than comparative nation-specific studies.

Compared to generational cohesion, Mannheim displays generational unit as a far more tangible affinity. Generational unit is a group that within the same generational cohesion responds to the same historical event in a distinctive way. That also means that generational units, which interpret experiences in a shared way leading to common practices and agency, coexist within the same generational cohesion. (Mannheim 1970) For example political movements as "Naschi"¹ in Russia coexist along with groups of young people, who orient themselves towards religion.

Generations are no static entities that can clearly be separated from each other: It is unlikely that every thirty years a new generation emerges that comprises of a new *Zeitgeist*. Refining the ideas of the art historian Wilhelm Pinder, Mannheim highlighted that social change and social shiftings ("soziale Verschiebungen") are enforced by "vital moments" ("vitale Mo-

¹ Naschi is a "pro-Putin" working political youth movement in Russia, which positions itself as a democratic anti-fascist movement. Its creation was encouraged by senior figures in the Russian presidential administration.

mente”) of generational change. Within this course new cultural actors (“Neue Kulturträger”) endowed with a new approach (“Neuer Zugang”) towards the accumulated cultural knowledge come into action. Processes of passing on norms and practices to the next generation that takes over these attitudes, emotions, opinions mainly unconsciously (“Hineinwachsen”) go along with processes of transformation. The latter imply a reflexive contestation of a passed-on cultural knowledge which becomes challenging due to a new social and historical location. (Mannheim 1970: 538) Comprehending generations in the framework of generational change of worldview (“Weltauffassung”) including shifts of interpretative performances (“interpretative Ordnungsleistungen”) and social practices due to shared experiences thus goes beyond a mere quantitative, measurable determination of age cohorts. (Wohlrab-Sahr 2002:10, 15) Following and combining Mannheims concept of generational cohesion (“Generationszusammenhang”) and generational unit (“Generationseinheit”) Ralf Bohnsack describes generations as a “conjunctive space of experiences” (“konjunktiver Erfahrungsraum”), a category that bears a resemblance to Bourdieus concept of Habitus. Conjunction is comprehended as complementary to distinction in the sense of mostly unquestioned practices marking social belonging (conjunction). (Wolf, Burkart 2002:16; Bohnsack, Schäffer 2002: 249) However, since unconsciously acquired knowledge cannot readily be contested, or to use Mannheims expression “broken up” (“auflockern”), there are no clear cut generational locations and generational cohesions. Rather Mannheim speaks of “generations in between” (“Zwischengenerationen”), backlashes and tensions. (1970: 540) In order to bring to account the conflictive dynamics of and between generations the German sociologist Martin Kohli suggested to link family generations, in which generational dynamics manifest themselves considerably, and economic and political generations to unfold the potentials of the generational approach. (Kohli 1996:6)

Specification of the aim of the conference

Following Mannheim we can speak of a dialectical relation between social dynamics and generations. On the one hand the formation of generations is fostered by changes in the historical and social environment due to the reflexive and conscious contestation of cultural knowledge next to a new approach to the social world. On the other hand it is the generational change, the change of world view and practices that foster social change. Generations are based on experiences of certain events leading to a shared generational consciousness in the Mannheimian sense or as Bohnsack put it generations constitute a “conjunctive space of experiences”.

The question of how different generations on the one hand experience and on the other hand foster system change marks the point of departure in our planned conference. This encompasses the research of following questions: To what extent are transformation processes – be it in the economic, political, cultural and familiar field – embedded into an array of generations (Abfolge von Generationen)? (cf. Wohlrab-Sahr’s study about religiosity and secularisation before and after 1989 in East Germany) Which cohorts have formed new generations and thus have become the mainspring of new world views and ways of life after 1989? Which generations on the other hand show stronger imprints of socialist bodies of knowledge and thus still struggle with what Sztompka called “the burdens” of the change over that were unequally distributed (Sztompka 2007:30)? Where can generation-specific differences of experiencing social change be identified and how do social actors mark and articulate these differences regarding social, political, economic practices? And which implications can be drawn from this generational approach regarding the concepts of “transition societies” and “post socialism”? What distinguishes one “post socialist” society from another bearing in mind that the former socialist zone reaches from East Germany in the West to Mongolia in the east? Already during socialist times these countries showed considerable differences that have clearly intensified over the last two decades. What on the other hand do these societies have in common, if we focus in particular on the mechanisms of social, i.e. generational change after 1989? Despite all differences a lot of similarities of these countries cannot be ignored. After all, each of these societies was characterized by centrally controlled institutions strictly in line with the elites’ interpretations of Marxism and Leninism. Thus political ideology had an impact on all spheres of life. In the end the structures of “real existing” socialism had more in common than those of “real existing” capitalist societies. (Humphrey 2002: 27)

In our conference the above mentioned questions shall be discussed and elaborated in plenary sessions, where research projects will be pair wisely presented and mutually commented. Possible fields of interest would be, but are not limited to:

- **Mobility and Migration:** dynamics of internal and international migration, commuter migration, for example with regard to the European integration processes or the emergence of new economic centres.
- **Strategies to make a living:** subsistence economy, micro enterprise, retail trade, black marketing, farming, self-employment and freelance work etc.
- **Public action and political participation:** the formation of new political parties, the latest revival of Socialist political concepts, the foundation of Human rights associa-

tion within the framework of democratization, revitalization of Nationalist movements, empowerment strategies for and of minority groups, the development of new local and administrative institutions for example environment action, etc.

- **History writing and intellectual and national remapping:** literature on the change-over, invoking of pre-Socialist cultural heritage, commemoration and reinterpretations of Socialism, regionalisms, etc.
- **Boundary-crossing associations:** movements as Esperanto clubs, pro European integration associations, bi-lateral movements as the German-Russian-exchange, economical partnerships and interest groups as CENTROPE in the border region of Austria, Slovakia, Czech Republic and Hungary, etc.
- **Religion, ritual and religious conflicts:** the continuous popularity of Socialist rituals such as “Jugendweihe”, the revitalization of religious communities for example the impact of the protestant church since the end of the 1980s in East Germany, the renaissance of religious practices, pre-socialist customs and the appearance of religious cults and symbols for instance “Seventh-Day Adventists” or shamanism, etc.

By means of different case studies we aim to investigate if specific generations that are characterised by a shared experience of system change do exist irrespective of national and regional borders? We do explicitly encourage young researchers to participate, whose work concerns life experiences of people in other socialist and post-socialist states than the former Soviet bloc, e.g. Yemen and China. Above that, studies are applicable which focus on the experience of people from the “West” with regard to system change after Socialism e.g. reactions to reunification of “Western Germans”.

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