

Sociological Concepts of Identity and Social Capital: The State of Civil Society in Slovak Republic

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Abstract: The study introduces the concept of social capital and deals with the basic relationships within the social identity theory. There has been considerable and increasing interest in social capital theory in recent years, evidenced by its application to various disciplines and numerous subject areas. Existing studies have suggested that social capital has considerable benefits for a range of economic and sociological outcomes. Social capital refers to connections among individuals-social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. Social capital draws attention to the fact that civic foundation is most effective when embedded in a network of reciprocal social relations. Interaction enables people to build communities and thus form a social structure. A sense of belonging and a personal experience of social networks (and the relationships of trust and tolerance which result from it) can be a great help for people. The study further describes the current problems of civil society in Slovak Republic.

Key words: Social capital, social identity, civil society, personal experience, Slovak Republic

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, we are experiencing a growth of interest in studying the theory of social capital, a fact that is demonstrated by the use of this term in various areas and scientific fields. This interest stems from the very nature of this concept that integrates sociology and economics and combines these disciplines with a wide range of ideas, including civil traditions, civic engagement and social cohesion. Existing studies suggest that social capital has significant benefits for a variety of economic and sociological outcomes. These advantages of the concept of social capital are not new but have their roots in the early work of economic and sociological thinkers. Claridge states that the list of researchers who are responsible for the popularity of social capital issues includes Pierre Bourdieu, James Coleman and Robert Putnam.

THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL CAPITAL

Robert Putnam describes social capital as a set of features of social organizations such as trust norms and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions (Putnam, 1995). Social capital is seen as a win-win for the individual and the community. According to Bauman the concept of social

capital can be understood as access to people in charge who have the items and services required by the individual (Bauman and May, 2001).

The term social capital has been around for several decades and is found in the researches of several researchers. One of the first definitions of the social capital concept was provided by Bourdieu (1983). He refers to social capital as the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintances and recognition (Bourdieu, 1983; Portes, 1998). His treatment of this concept is instrumental, focusing on the benefits to individuals through participation in the group and sociability with intentional structures in order to create this resource.

The concept of social capital is significant also within the field of social work. For example, Healy and Hampshire (2002) introduce a synergy model of social capital formation that incorporates a dual focus on local community networks and the role of the institutions of government, non-government agencies and business in the creation of social capital. They are thus trying to apply this model for social work practice (Healy and Hampshire, 2002). Emphasis on the word capital in its definition stresses Lin (2001) when social capital is defined as an investment in social relations with the expected return on the marketplace. Lin (2001) said the

market chosen for analysis may be economic, political, labor or community. Social capital or resources accessed through connections and relations is therefore, critical (along with human capital or what a person or organization actually possesses) in achieving goals for individuals, social groups, organizations and communities. Similarly, Cox (Bullen and Onyx, 1998) differentiates between the financial, physical, human and social capital, stating that: there has been too little attention paid to social capital. Social capital refers to the processes between people which establish networks, norms, social trust and facilitate co-ordination and co-operation for mutual benefit. Social capital is also appropriate because it can be measured and quantified so we can distribute its benefits and avoid its losses (Bullen and Onyx, 1998). These processes are also known in the Anglo-Saxon literature as social fabric or social glue but one can also use the term capital because it invests the concept with the reflected status from other forms of capital. Putnam (2000) introduces this idea: whereas physical capital refers to physical objects and human capital refers to the properties of individuals, social capital refers to connections among individuals-social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. In that sense social capital is closely related to what some have called civic virtue. The difference is that social capital calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a sense network of reciprocal social relations. A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital.

THE CONCEPT OF IDENTITY IN SOCIOLOGY

The sociological approach to personality and identity begins with the assumption that there is a connection between self and society (Stryker, 1980). In general, sociologists are interested in understanding the nature of society and social structure, its forms and patterns, ways in which it is developed and transformed. The traditional perspective of symbolic interactionism (a situational approach to self and society) sees the society formed through the interpretations and definitions of actors in situations (Blumer, 1969). According to this view we do not see the society pre-shaped. Instead we believe that the society is stable and durable in pattern regularities that characterize most human activities (Stryker, 1980). The perspective of symbolic interactionism sees self as evolving from the mind, the mind emerging and evolving from the social interaction and patterned social interaction as a cornerstone of social structure (Mead, 1934). As self appears in social interaction within a complex, organized, and differentiated society, it must be comprehensive, well organized and differentiated, hence the statement self reflects society (Stryker, 1980).

There are several approaches to identity in sociology. Stryker (1987) points to the existence of a variety of perspectives. Some of them have cultural or collective view of identity in which the term represents the thoughts, beliefs and practices of a group or team (Stryker, 1987). This view lacks the ability to examine the variability of behavior, motivation and interaction. Another view sees identity as embedded in social group or category. This view lacks importance of group behavior like relationships between the roles of group members (Stets and Burke, 2003). The third view of identity grows out of the tradition of symbolic interactionism (Stryker, 1980). This view takes into account the individual relations of roles and variability of identity, motivation and differentiation.

Identity theory based on a structural symbolic interactionism currently has two slightly different emphases (Stryker and Burke, 2000). In the research of Stryker the focus is on how social structure affects one's identity and vice versa, behavior. The research of Burke (1997) the emphasis is on internal dynamics inside self which affects behavior.

Social identity theory is based on the idea that membership in social groups is an important determinant of individual behavior. Social groups are collections of individuals who coordinate their action in some way (Davis, 2014). Social identity theory as developed in social psychology, explains how a person has a social group identity in terms of the identification with idea. When a person identifies with others, their individual identity is somehow re-framed in terms of others identities. The main conceptualization of this among social identity theorists is associated with John Turner's idea of self-categorization (Davis, 2014). In effect when people self-categorize themselves in social group terms, they are motivated by social group goals rather than individual goals, make the group's characteristics their own personal characteristics and thus incorporate social group identities in their personal identities (Davis, 2014).

THE STATE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN SLOVAK REPUBLIC

Social capital is closely linked to civil society (Pavelek, 2014). An ideal civil society can be described as an open, democratic social market society with no place of personal authority, totalitarian modes, violence over people and where full respect of law and moral exists, principles of humanity and justice are exercised by every person (Grudtsina and Galushkin, 2013). Slovak Republic

cope with many problems that are common for most of post-totalitarian countries. Community involvement and strong social ties are common in Western countries from a historical perspective and in post-communist countries this simply is not the case (Pavelek, 2013a, b). Under the communist regime the public sector and state were identical terms where the state dominated and interfered into all aspects of society (Dobrikova and Veselska, 2013). After the fall of communism, new freedom and opportunities for civic activism and association have opened and new activities started to flourish. New actors-active citizens and their structures Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) and other independent bodies-started to play an increasing role in the Slovak society. New sphere of societal life-civil society has been gaining in its importance (Marcek, 2008). For Slovakia's civil society, the period 1993-1998 can be seen as one of years spent learning, gaining experience and building up the sector. Foreign funding aimed primarily at the building of civil society in Slovakia was made available (Brezani, 2013). But, it was also an era of autocratic shift in the governing of the country. Slovak civil society was therefore, shaken from its complacency to mobilize against this new threat. Slovak NGOs and Slovak civil society had to unite and fight against principles of autocracy (Feffer, 2013).

During the second period (1998-2004) the domestic political situation had improved significantly due to the change of government. Consequently, Slovakia found itself back on track towards the EU and became an OECD member. Slovakia transformed itself from recipient to donor.

The third period which can be framed by Slovakia's EU membership and implementation of the two medium-term ODA strategies Medium-Term Strategy for Official Development Assistance: 2003-2008, Bratislava: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic 2003 and Medium-Term Strategy for Official Development Assistance: 2008-2013, Bratislava: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic 2008 (Brezani, 2013).

Many researchers point out that totalitarian regimes cancelled the separation of the society from state, subjugated the civil society to the state and excluded the validity of many rights and freedoms existing before the state and being independent on it. In this extreme form of political society, the societal organizations were not the autonomous expression of interests but the additional tool of their amelioration and supervision. The restoration of the autonomy of the individual and civil society has become the main task in preventing the expansionism of

the state, though, it does not express that such a danger is connected only with state because its source also exists in a civil society. State can then only be used as a kind of power instrument. Therefore, the restoration of civil society also has this qualitative dimension it requires the restoration of democratic citizenship and civil virtues. In civil society a freely acting individual is dependable on the results of his/her research and exchanging them by his/hers will (Babintsev and Sapryka, 2013).

Some see the evolution of Slovakia in this process as successful, stating that the creation of a democratic civil society, built upon involvement of a relatively large group of civic activists and strong and politically independent civic communities and associations is what is now known as the Slovak story. And in this way, the Slovak Republic as a democratic state from your perspective, a small country in the center of Europe-became a success story not only in Europe (Vasaryova, 2005).

However, civil society in Slovakia faces several constraints and challenges and lacks a supportive legal and fiscal environment. The economic and financial crisis continues to hit the sector hard (EEA Grants, 2013). A look on empirical data shows many difficulties and obstacles. In his research on civil society Howard (2003) presents empirical findings that constitute the crucial baseline, a comparative measure of participation in voluntary organizations across a wide set of countries. The results show that post-communist countries are almost exclusively grouped at the lowest levels of organizational membership. Moreover, levels of membership in post-communist countries have declined significantly, especially when compared to those in the post-authoritarian countries. With the partial exception of labor unions, participation in voluntary organizations is much lower in post-communist countries than in the older democracies and the post-authoritarian countries (Howard, 2003). People may have the idea that only activities that bring material benefits or rewards can be considered meaningful. The involvement outside personal interests is thus low. However, the trend in a post-modern world is just the opposite, citizens should be involved in public interest. Social and political networks should be organized horizontally not hierarchically. Civil society cannot be instituted overnight from above (Domanov, 2013). To illustrate this phenomenon Putnam's example of so-called megachurches can be used. These are theological institutions but religion is not the one and only factor linking their members. The strong ties are based not on theology but on the emotional bonds to others in small groups. Most of these people are looking for a meaning in their lives but they also search for friends. The Church, therefore, operates on a basis of

thousands of small groups (Putnam, 2000). And such structure could be used to revive many other organizations and thus to stimulate volunteering not only from above but also in a bottom-up direction (Pavelek, 2014, 2012a-c, 2013a, b).

The important task is to strengthen the civic solidarity, civic participation and integrity. In this context, volunteering is a fundamental phenomenon and its importance in the globalized society of the third millennium will only increase. Volunteering helps the civil society to eliminate negative phenomena at the individual and societal level (Pavelek, 2013a, b). The reality of the connection between social inclusion and society is different with specific target groups. From the evolution perspective are the conditions on political level comparable with other European countries (Sramata and Kallay, 2010; Kallay *et al.*, 2013).

CONCLUSION

The concept of civil society has played a central role in the recent global debate about the preconditions for democracy and democratization. It is evident that there had been a fundamental shift over the last three decades in such topics as civic engagement, informal social ties, tolerance and trust, etc. Some researchers argue that the emergence of a global cosmopolitan society will be linked to the revival of ideas and practices of civic culture. In a promise of a global civil society alternative visions can be produced and exchanged. This could be an answer to Robert Putnam's discussion about social capital and civic engagement.

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