
Introduction to the Issue on Social Policy

Sociological analysis of social policy issues is a new phenomenon in Eastern Europe. The societal transformation has shown that the economic discipline is better prepared to raise important questions and provide their answers, sometimes prefabricated by neoclassical theory. The main corpus of criticism of the system of social guarantees has only come after its actual dismantling and this criticism is lagging considerably behind the larger critique of the command economic system. Theorizing about "social reform" has come only after ample reasoning and speculation concerning the economic reform and after some important steps has already occurred. The existing time lag is still great, although the social policy literature studying the East-Central-European problem is growing, largely thanks to Western experts on the topic. [Deacon 1992, Ferge and Kolberg 1992, Ringen and Wallace 1993, *Journal* 1993]

Also focussing on the social issues raised by the transformation is the international project entitled "The Social Costs of Economic Transformation in Central Europe" (SOCO) supported by the Ford Foundation and The Pew Charitable Trusts and organized by the Institute of Human Sciences in Vienna. This program is obviously not only sociological but also economic and deeply policy-oriented. On the basis of a comprehensive analysis of the main areas and actors in social policy, ameliorative policies in the labor market and a social benefit system should be proposed. Two national research teams (the Polish and Hungarian) have already started their work and the other two (Czech and Slovak) will start before the end of 1993 (see Kelly Musick's report in the News and Information section of this volume).

In this issue, we will depict various aspects of social policy as well as various national perspectives. Three of the authors represent national teams involved in the SOCO project: Julia Szalai (Hungary), Radoslaw Markowski (Poland) and Jiří Večerník (Czech Republic). The other authors and topics also deal with this broad problem:

* In Jiří Večerník's article, social policy is analyzed from various points of view: the two-faced nature of the communist system of "social guarantees," the expectation of social citizenship in the continued absence of a market, and the need to de-institutionalize society and simultaneously establish new institutions. Various models of capitalism (state, liberal and corporatist) are discussed and the various dilemmas accompanying policy-making in transition are shown.

* The Slovak system of social policy is studied in Erika Kvapilová's contribution on a rather pragmatic level. The author surveys the emancipation process of the Slovak system from the Czech, shows its endemic problems and concludes by questioning the harmonization of the short-term goals of social policy with the country's long-term social strategy.

* Julia Szalai, examining the Hungarian government's new program, shows that the "socialist" social policy had several functions, serving simultaneously the preservation and decomposition of the communist order. The ongoing marketization of the system has caused the impoverishment of people living from benefits, but also helped people build alternative pillars for a decent standard of living. She warns of the possibility of social disintegration but also expresses optimism for more integrative development.

* The cross-national study written by Radoslaw Markowski studies the dependence of political attitudes on social policy determinants using a comparative four-country survey. He concludes that these determinants can be seen as good predictors of satisfaction with the political system and of the general vision of political prospects, whereas the scope of popular tolerance and the propensity to join protests manifest only a slight correlation.

* Ivo Možný, using qualitative research methods, shows one possible "new social contract" concluded between the "new" capitalists (who are, in fact, old socialist managers) and "free" labor (but with old paternalistic expectations). The low intensity of industrial conflict is made possible by continuing paternalistic behavior, which is enabled by imperfections in the market.

* The context in which social policy is being developed is sketched by Pavel Machonin's characterization of the Soviet-type social structure. Various (partly complementary) approaches for explaining the stratification of the past and the burden of the remaining legacies of communism are shown.

* In a robust empirical analysis, Petr Matějů describes the struggle of egalitarian and inegalitarian norms and values in a comparative perspective. Whereas in the Netherlands inegalitarian norms are able to resist the challenge from egalitarian ideology, in the Czech lands the capacity for an egalitarian interpretation of distributive justice to challenge meritocratic norms is much stronger.

Although only a modest contribution to the sociological and socio-political debate on social policy and stratification schemes, we hope the issues and topics raised in this issue will continue to be a major concern of all theoretical and empirical, academic and policy-oriented research.

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References

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