

Generations of Change

Introduction

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This issue of *InterDisciplines* is a product of the conference »Generations of Change: Understanding Post-Socialism and Transition Processes from a Generational Perspective«. This conference, held at the Bielefeld Graduate School in History and Sociology in November 2010, brought together a group of international scholars; among them anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists and historians. Purpose was a shift in the prevailing geopolitical angle and regional focus that has been so popular in the study of post socialism in favour of a generational perspective.

It is almost cliché to reiterate that 1989 marks a break of historical continuity. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the later collapse of the Soviet regime a large part of the »socialist world« disappeared from the map. Social scientists and contemporary historians immediately set out to observe and analyse a phenomenon widely known as the »transformation process« or the »transition«, labelling the period of all-embracing changes as »post-socialism«. Rapidly, new terms entered the academic and public debate, classifying the former »Eastern bloc« into regional spaces such as »the Baltics«, »Central Eastern Europe«, »Southern Eastern Europe« or »Central Asia« and referring to the vanishing and emerging states by means of attributive constructions, creating diverse »Exs«, »Posts« and »Formers«.

During the last decade, the terms »transition« and »transformation« have been increasingly criticised as ideologically biased and analytically indefinite. A transition to what? Are these countries expected to copy »Western« social models? After all, the term transition implies a process of change as opposed to relative stability. But what are the ideal stable

social, political and economic conditions and who decides when this goal is achieved? How long will »post« last and isn't social change a phenomenon inherent to all societies?

Not least the debate between anthropologist Chris Hann and historian Stephan Merl in this volume shows that there still is a need for more in-depth discussion on how to read post socialist changes as well as on the delineation of the initial moment of transformation. Chris Hann's contribution »Moral dispossession« suggests we should consider socialism not merely as an authoritarian political system, but also as »a moral order in the Rousseau-Durkheimian sense« (p. 15). Using the example of rural Hungary he finds that the abrupt implementation of the market economy was a moral dispossession that affected many people and rendered their everyday knowledge obsolete. In his commentary »Moral dispossession of the (already) morally dispossessed« Stefan Merl replies that collectivization in the countryside during socialism »meant moral dispossession as well« (p. 38) and many of the hardships people have felt since the onset of the transformation are the result of socio-economic structures implemented under socialist rule. The dictatorships simply drew a veil of silence over phenomena which became apparent only in the course of system change after 1989. »This is the reason why the people connected the hardships they felt during transformation to »market capitalism«« (p. 40). Stephan Merl reminds us of central methodological problems of biographical research. Many people are inclined to reconstruct the past »as they would have liked it to be« (p. 38 & 50). Chris Hann's argument that scientists need to avoid constructing life experiences of interview partners »as *we* would like them to remember« (p. 50) shifts the focus to a different research interest. The anthropologist concentrates on the impact economic orders have on interpretative patterns and horizons of experiences, whereas an historical research endeavour avoids reliance on retrospective accounts. A source of error for one discipline is data for another. At the risk of simplifying or exaggerating the disciplinary differences one might say social scientists are interested in experiences made under certain circumstances, while historians focus on the circumstances that bring about experiences. A generational approach need not abandon

either perspective. The controversy between Chris Hann and Stephan Merl illustrates how theoretical frameworks like economic concepts shape both empirical findings and their interpretation. As much as people are inclined to process their life experiences in view to present day circumstances, scientists' interpretations are informed by theoretical assumptions. Debates like that are therefore indispensable in the process of writing culture and history. What is broadly referred to as the »transition process« evidently has not become »history« yet.

No doubt people's everyday knowledge was challenged by the end of socialism, in some cases more massively than in others – this was, and probably still is, a question of generational belonging. However, for the most part, the concept of transition refers to structural alterations in the economies as well as the political, administrative and juridical regimes of nation states and regions. Researchers of post-socialism have compiled a profound body of knowledge on the specificities of the newly emerged nation states and regional entities (see for example Andorka 1997; Meiselwitz & Segert 1997; Segert 2009). Nevertheless, an approach which goes beyond the redrawn borders within the former socialist space and focuses on generations and age cohorts of those who were affected in one way or another by characteristics common to all former socialist states¹ as well as on the breakdown of socialism can shed new light on mechanisms of social change after 1989.

The intention of the conference was to create a strong emphasis on the »social arrangements of the people« (Hann 2002: 11) who were not merely faced with changing structures, but, due to a reflexive approach towards the world in which they live, also actively fostered transformations. Hence regional divergences or particularities were not our main concern, although they should not be neglected. Instead we wanted to bring to light the social relations between people whose lives were informed in different ways by the socialist order due to age differences.

1 For example: restricted freedom of action and movement, surveillance, command economy, etc.

One decade ago, anthropologist Caroline Humphrey already raised the question of whether the attributes ›post-socialism‹ and ›post-socialist‹ are still appropriate categories for grasping the social circumstances of and ways of life in former socialist countries in Europe and Asia (Humphrey 2002: 26). Yet we cannot expect cultural practices to disappear completely and be replaced by new ones. The notion ›post-socialist‹ will remain relevant as long as patterns of interpretation, ideologies and practices that are rooted in the socialist era serve people as a reference point for the perception and assessment of the present (Hann 2002: 7). As sociologist Piotr Sztompka has 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). Similarly, Humphrey argues that the strong impact of the socialist past on people's stances cannot be ignored. According to her, this socialist imprinting will lose its effect only in the course of generational succession (Humphrey 2002: 29). This emphasis on generational dynamics is convincing. Unfortunately Caroline Humphrey does not develop in more detail the idea of specific generational attitudes towards social change by thoroughly pursuing the theoretical implications and empirical premises of a generational approach. There have however been some noticeable exceptions, researchers who apply a generational perspective in order to analyse transitional processes (cf. Ahbe & Gries 2006; Bürgel 2006; Wohlrab-Sahr et al. 2009). These studies show that mechanisms of change and stability can be understood more comprehensively when the analytical framework focuses on tensions between the generations involved and their actors (cf. Burkhart & Wolf 2002: 421).

Crucial to generational studies is an understanding that cohorts must not be equated with generation. Nonetheless, a closer look at cohorts often provides useful pointers towards the formation of cultural/social generations, which have to be reconstructed as regards their means of distinguishing themselves from preceding generations (Wohlrab-Sahr 2002: 216). For instance, Elena Glushko's article in this volume deals with two generations of Slovaks in close succession and their experiences of the

Prague Spring and its aftermath and how in consequence they developed distinctive attitudes towards politics in contemporary Slovakia.

The analytical distinction between generation and cohort was one of the essential achievements of Karl Mannheim's sociology of knowledge as elaborated in his programmatic essay *The problem of generations* (1970 [1928]). Refining the ideas of the art historian Wilhelm Pinder, Mannheim maintained that social change and shifts are enforced by »vital moments« of generational change. In the course of this change, new cultural actors endowed with novel approaches towards accumulated cultural knowledge come into action. Mainly subconscious processes of passing on to the next generation norms and practices which grow into attitudes, emotions and opinions go hand in hand with processes of transformation which imply reflection on transmitted cultural knowledge through the ages (Mannheim 1970 [1928]: 538).

Central to Mannheim's theory is the distinction between the analytical categories of »generation location«, »generation as actuality« and »generation unit«. Generation location is determined by the biological cycle, for example date of birth and death and belonging to one socio-historical space and time. A common generation location means nothing more than co-presence in time within one socio-historical context. This holds the potential to materialize as generation as actuality when social actors participate in shared historical destinies (Mannheim 1970 [1928]: 536). Accordingly, generation as actuality exceeds the mere historical co-presence of individuals (Diepstraten et al. 1999). Yet social ties and a feeling of connectedness can shift or be lost. In contrast, Mannheim conceptualises the generation unit as a far more substantial affinity (Mannheim 1970 [1928]: 525). Generation unit refers to a concrete social group within the same actual generation (Mannheim 1970 [1928]: 548). Generation units are comprehended as the actual manifestations of a generation objectified as a quantitatively limited group (Diepstraten et al. 1999). Its members evolve a common vision of historical events or shifts in the socio-historical structure. This also means that different generation units coexist; each of them interprets experiences in a distinctive way and adopts specific practices in response to socio-historical events. It is these

coherent reactions and interpretive performances that contain binding power (Mannheim 1970 [1928]: 547).

Historians and sociologists have critically revisited the analytical category of ›generation‹. Many authors make clear that even though generation has become a fundamental interpretive category in history and the social sciences, it remains a highly ambiguous concept and is open to criticism (Lepsius 2005: 47). Among other hindrances, generational research has not satisfyingly answered the question whether generation refers to an emic self-description of social actors or an etic ascription by researchers for the sake of periodization. To date, the latter has prevailed, i.e. deductive and ex post application of the concept in order to explain social change and continuity rather than inductive description of how social actors themselves distinguish one generation from another. Furthermore, this deductive, mostly retrospective research programme focuses on the explanation of societal dynamics as a whole (Jureit & Wildt 2005: 22). In the end, the understanding of what a generation is has not managed to overcome its close linkage to age cohorts (Jureit & Wildt 2005: 25). In this respect, the sociologist M. Rainer Lepsius speaks of a focus on ›experiences of cohorts‹ (Lepsius 2005: 50). Kirsten Gerland's article in this volume provides an example where generation is explicitly interpreted as an emic category of self-description. What Mannheim defined as a ›generation unit‹ can probably best be found in her contribution on the ›young protest generation‹ in 1980s Poland during martial law.

Mannheim's conceptual triad (generation location, generation as an actuality and generation unit) proves a rather macrosociological impetus. However, on the micro level of families, social generation and familial generation intersect. Within one family, different generation locations coexist. Likewise, family members may belong to different generations as actuality or even to generation units beyond the family context. They may live in what sociologist Ralf Bohnsack has called ›conjunctive spaces of experiences‹² (2002: 249) – a constellation in which negotia-

2 The concept of a conjunctive space of experience bears a resemblance to Bourdieu's idea of ›habitus‹. Conjunction is comprehended as comple-

tions or even tensions may arise in family life. In order to unfold the potentials of the generational approach, sociologist Martin Kohli has suggested linking familial generations, in which generational dynamics manifest themselves considerably, with economic and political generations (Kohli 1996: 6). Caterina Rohde's article in this volume demonstrates that social generations and familial generations are inextricably linked. She follows the life courses of young Russian women whose decision to migrate is informed by both their generational belonging in post-socialist Russia as well as by their position in the family.

Following the latest interdisciplinary discussion on the state of the art, it became evident during the conference that operationalizing the theoretical concept of generation still remains an obstacle. Even though all papers described generations or rather generational dynamics and ruptures – either in the sense of familial relations or socio-historical generations – a generational perspective could not be unmistakably identified using established methodological tools. As a result, the generational approach remains unspecific, also as regards methodological tools appropriate for the identification of mechanisms of distinguishing current generations from those that precede them. To make a long story short: even if the generational approach appears interesting for the investigation of processes of social change, it does not provide a coherent study programme as it does, for instance in biographical research or historical semantics.

This volume does not claim to offer a solution to the problems outlined above. It presents a selection of papers that were given during the conference. The contributors adopted a generational approach as an alternative perspective on their own case studies, highlighting aspects of generational dynamics. We thank all our guests and contributors for their interesting papers and comments during the discussion. Special thanks go to the keynote speaker Chris Hann, Max-Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle/Saale and to the discussants of the opening lecture who also chaired the panels: Tatiana Barchunova, Novosibirsk Uni-

mentary to distinction in the sense of mostly unquestioned practices marking social belonging (Bohnsack & Schäffer 2002: 249).

versity; Stephan Merl, Bielefeld University and Thomas Schmidt-Lux, Leipzig University. We also thank the Bielefeld Graduate School in History and Sociology for making the conference possible, the editors of *InterDisciplines* for accepting this special issue, and last but not least all referees for comments and advice.

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