

Interpreting Political Culture: Some Reflections about Empirical Surveys in Hungary

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Recently, there has been a growing interest in the task of understanding political culture in Hungary. Is the country really democratic in its culture? What are the cultural effects of rapid social and political changes? What are people's attitudes toward new political institutions? What kind of values and preferences are informing people's political choices and acts? These are among the questions that surveys try to answer most often about political culture. This interest is fueled, on the one hand, by the politicians who try to come to terms with the vox populi and seek to increase their popularity. On the other hand, scholars of a discipline that has only been recently legitimized in Hungary, that of political science, are looking for ready-made conceptual tools in order to create a language which is complex and specific enough to found a science and to grasp the multifaceted reality of the political field .

The widespread use of the notion of political culture is thus only partly explained by the natural enthusiasm of political scientists about properly describing an object of the field; it is also a rhetorical strategy that serves to package approaches and interpretations that would not fit in the framework of other conceptual schemes. The fact that political science is still in statu nascendi in Hungary and that the concept of political culture opened up a discursive space where scholars are freely wandering, becomes a practical problem when one tries to review the political culture literature. Even a quick keyword search in a library will reveal that the political culture label covers a wide array of issues and approaches. Different authors start from different assumptions, use different methods and sometimes arrive at different conclusions.

This situation, which was already described years ago (see Becskehazi 1993), calls for reflections about political cultural research. In this paper, given the limitation of space and of my own capacities, I do not intend to give, from a meta-level, an all-embracing account of research on Hungarian political culture; nor do I attempt to offer a theoretical framework for future studies. My intention is to contribute to the self-reflection of Hungarian political scholars concerning cultural research by calling attention to some important problems that characterize current approaches. My central thesis is that research on political culture generally lacks well-elaborated and convincing theoretical foundations, and that this fact, with other inherent methodological problems, leads to the inadequacy and platitudinous features

of most of the results offered by political scientists about Hungarian political culture.

In the following section of the paper I will review briefly the main results of empirical studies on Hungarian political culture. I do not claim to cover all relevant literature; it is not clear anyway what counts as relevant literature on political culture. However, I hope that, using the language of empirical studies, my sample is more or less representative and that I succeeded in grasping the most relevant approaches and results.

The paper focuses on those empirical studies that use the survey methodology, i.e., the polling of a sample of people which represents the society or a certain group of it in terms of a number of characteristics, e.g. age, sex, occupation. We may call this methodology an *ex ante* approach in the sense that it generally aims at taking into account those attitudes, orientations and opinions which precede actions in a logical sense. The survey methodology has been the classical way of studying political culture since the comparative study of Almond and Verba in the 50s which popularized the term.

Nevertheless, *ex post* approaches are also used in political cultural studies: research on voters' behavior and political participation, accounts and analysis of events, and case studies can be seen as examples of this kind of research. Although the paper will sometime refer to some of these studies, its main focus will be on survey results. I do not define the concept of political culture; instead I am interested in how studies construct their own definition and approach to political culture. One such definition and approach is that provided by Almond and Verba (1963). This approach, however, has not been used in Hungary. Several Hungarian theoreticians have tried to define political culture (Gombar 1983 ~ Kulesar 1987; Bihari 1993), but their concepts have not been echoed either in empirical studies. Actually, it is interesting that empirical scholars do not give a full definition of political culture. Their definitions are given implicitly (through the interpretation of data) and/or in a fragmented way. For instance, an outstanding scholar of the field, Janos Simon, calls his results contributions to the study of political culture (Simon 1994: 173), Maria Vasarhelyi writes about dominant opinions and popular ideologies (Vasarhelyi 1996). The lack of definitions is symptomatic and, in my understanding, relates to the above-mentioned problem of missing conceptual frameworks. Given the fragmented nature of Hungarian political cultural studies, in the following short review I will not present the research in details, but I will concentrate on its main messages.

Attitudes Towards Democracy and Market Economy

According to a generally shared consensus, an important characteristic of a given political culture at the systemic level is the general public's attitude toward democracy. Many studies asked for opinions about democracy as the best political system for Hungary and about a real need for a Parliament and political parties (Simon 1993; Broszt 1995; Vasarhelyi 1996). The results are reassuring: the great majority of people (about 90%) thinks

that Hungary needs political parties and democracy. A related issue is the acceptance of a market economy (Simon 1994; Bruszt 1995; Vasarhelyi 1996; Angleusz and Tardos 1996). Different studies, although using slightly different questions, concluded with a similar result: general attitudes are less favorable and more ambiguous toward a market economy than toward democracy and opinions are worsening through the time. Nevertheless the majority supports capitalism; in Hungary the percentage is larger than in other CEE countries. An important question is, however, what kinds of democracy and capitalism are people supporting or rejecting. While, according to the surveys, in Hungary more people than in Western countries support capitalism and think that a market economy is the best economic system, it is generally believed that people are more paternalistic in our region. For instance, people in CEE countries tend to agree with the statement that it is the government responsibility to assure full employment and income equality (Bruszt 1995:54, 58).

It is also apparent that CEE citizens (particularly Hungarian and Polish) have a tendency to associate welfare (instead of freedom) with democracy. Thus, scholars hold that it is obvious that Poles and Hungarians are longing the most for material welfare (Simon 1995 :57) and that political changes have been motivated more by the desire for increasing welfare than for acquiring more freedom (Lazar 1993). Indeed, surveys show that only half of the Hungarian population thinks that freedom was missing in the Communist era (Simon 1992:615), and, accordingly, half of the population is oriented toward a nostalgia for the Kadar regime (Vasarhelyi 1996:55). Data, however, are ambiguous. Other surveys show that the discrediting of the ancient regime is the main source of legitimation of democracy and that most people associate such negative characteristics as food shortage, corruption, and even inequality with socialism (Bruszt 1995). It is also interesting that the sometimes condemned material orientation of the attitude of Hungarian and Polish citizens toward democracy shows the same values in case of Britain, a country with long-standing liberal traditions. The question thus remains: what are the attitudes of Hungarians toward democracy and capitalism and what kind of democracy are they supporting?

Confidence

Many studies have focused on people's confidence in the new political institutions (Simon 1992, 1993, 1994, 1996, 1997; Bruszt 1995; Orkeny, 1996). According to Bruszt (1995 :64) people's confidence in their own prospects and in democratic political institutions correlates strongly with opinions supporting democracy itself. That is, confidence is taken to be related to the legitimation of the new system. Surveys show that people are far less satisfied with politics than with any other element of their life (Csepeli et al.1993, p.352), and the performance of democracy is seen to be declining (Simon 1993, p. 609). That is, while people generally accept democracy and think that social problems can be best solved in a democratic regime, they are less and less satisfied with the existing democracy. They still have some

confidence (score 41 out of 100) in some institutions (like the Constitutional Court), but they do not trust the government, the Parliament and the parties (score 15; see Simon, 1991:123, 1996:658). This general picture is stressed by many surveys, although it is to be noted that different surveys using different methodology concluded with considerably different results. The survey of

Vasarhelyi (1996), for instance, asked people the following question: To what extent do the following institutions serve people's interest? This research demonstrated that the level of confidence is not so low: political institutions scored 50 to 70 out of 100 and the scores remained relatively stable in time. People feel that their social status has declined and that ..they do not have positive prospects for the future (Bruszt and Simon 1994; Orkeny 1996:222). An international comparison concluded that Hungarian citizens were the most pessimistic in 1990 about the social effects of the changes that were to come: 61% of the Hungarians thought that the economic situation of the country would deteriorate, while in Czechoslovakia the same ratio was only 21% (Simon 1991). Again, however, other surveys show less dramatic pictures. One year later, only 30% of the people thought that the situation would deteriorate (Bruszt and Simon 1994:776). The distance between the two figures, 61% and 30%, seems to be too large to be attributed to a difference in statistical techniques. Nevertheless, surveys generally report a lack of confidence in political institutions. This is taken by some as the sign of a coming legitimation crisis (Bihari 1996; Bayer 1997). Other scholars,

however, suggest that the deficit of confidence is not necessarily a sign of a legitimation crisis, but a constitutive feature of Hungarian political culture (Csizmadia 1997). According to this interpretation, confidence does not play the same role in Hungary as in other Western countries. Here a tacit support and a kind of forbearance serve as social underpinnings of the political system. The idea that the lack of confidence is not necessary a sign of a crisis, but rather of a certain civil strategy, is supported by the fact that the nonvoters are very passive in terms of other forms of political participation or contestation as well.

Political Participation

If the level of confidence of Hungarians in their political institutions is low, it is not surprising that they also think that they could not do much to oppose a political decision that is not in their interest. Although the feeling of being defenseless declined between 1989 and 1992, it increased again after 1993 (Simon 1994: 182). A comparative survey revealed that Hungary scored less than some Third World countries (like Turkey or Venezuela) in terms of what people think of their possibilities of articulating interests (Simon 1994: 184). Other surveys revealed that the growing feeling of defenselessness made radical forms of protest more acceptable to Hungarians (Gerentser and Tóth 1996:639). The majority, however still rejects anti-democratic forms of protest and prefers peaceful demonstrations.) Ex post-type data on political participation also demonstrate that Hungarians are passive. Participation in the first democratic elections was the lowest in the region, and the few

referendums organized in the past ten years were even less appealing for the people. In 1997, only 5.5% of the people participated in some political organization (Simon 1996:657). In 1996, only 13% of the people said that they had signed a petition since 1990 and 7% claimed to have participated in a demonstration (Orkeny 1996:256). The number of strikes is also very low in the region. All these data reveal a low level of political activity. A related question is the kind of protest people are accepting. As mentioned above, Hungarians reject violent forms of protest more than, for instance, Romanians do. Hungarians' behavior reflects this attitude: illegitimate actions, radical forms of protest, and political violence have been extremely rare in Hungary (Szabo 1997:329).

Political Values

A very important dimension of political culture consists of political values (Simon 1996:612). Surveys generally reflect that for Hungarians the most important values are good life and welfare: for 35% of people, the most important thing in democracy is welfare, for 26% the most important is the government, which takes care of people's needs, and for 21% it is equal rights (Lazar 1993:4). Simon (1993, 1994, 1997) asked people to rank 12 values. The top three in the ranking were good life, job security, and welfare; the fourth was education and culture, and freedom of speech ranked sixth. The trends of the past years illustrate that the importance of each of the values has increased and the relative difference between them decreased. A paternalistic government is highly valued in Hungary; redistributive claims, however, are not based on a clear value orientation. Neither meritocratic nor egalitarian ideas, nor needs based on ideas of justice play a fundamental role in evaluating redistributive policies (Orkeny 1996:214). That is, redistribution is not taken to be an issue of justice. Ideas on justice are very confusing; it is interesting that only 19% of the people claimed to have been a victim of some injustice in the previous five years (Orkeny 1996:99).

Hungarians seem to be quite individualistic, but individualism is generally characterized in negative terms. Hungarian individualism, that is, is more an absence of solidarity or other communitarian values than a praise for individual achievements (Bruszt and Simon 1994:781). If Hungarians are individualized, it is not surprising that the majority is not very concerned about problems of the nation (Vasarhelyi 1996:59). Thirty-four percent of the people reported that the nation as such is not to be valued, and 64% think that the nation is important, but there are other more important things (Csepeli 1992).

Political Subcultures

Political culture has been taken so far as something homogeneous. In reality, however, society is culturally divided, and the different parts of it sometimes display considerably different features in terms of political attitudes, orientations, and behavior. This is the broad concept of political subcultures: it relates to the differences found in a national culture

characterized in general terms, Political subcultures can be defined in narrow terms as well. In this case, a political subculture needs some kind of identity or self-reflection on the part of its members; i.e., mere similarities between some people in terms of their political attitudes, values, etc. do not define a political subculture. Subcultures have not been the focus of Hungarian

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political research; nevertheless, some studies aimed at examining political subcultures in either a wide or a narrow sense. Some surveys aimed at identifying people's political orientations in the left-right scheme. Results show that only half of the people surveyed was familiar with the meaning of political left and right, and most of them placed themselves in the center (Simon 1995, p. 45). Angelusz and Tardos (1991) tried to work out the typology of main ideologies and their relations to the followers of political parties. They did not find deep ideological divides between the followers of different parties. Gazso and Stumpf (1995) found something similar: it seems that only 100/0 of the voters have strong party preferences and clear ideological orientations. They concluded that political parties do not have deep roots in the Hungarian society. In other words, we might say that ideologies do not play an important role in defining political subcultures. It seems that differences in political culture are weakly explained by generational differences; education and social status are more important (Gazso and Stumpf 1996; Robert 1994a; Garami and Toth 1994).

Less-educated people in less urbanized areas and with a lower social status tend to be more frustrated about the political changes; they prefer paternalistic state policies; they are less tolerant about income inequalities; they have less confidence in democracy; and, compared to the average, have more positive attitudes toward radical political actions, although their political activity is generally low. Some studies describe a political subculture in the narrow sense. Mate Szabo studied alternative political movements (Szabo 1993, 1996), and Zsolt Enyedi wrote about the Christian parties and movements (Enyedi 1998).

Interpreting Political Culture: Some Reflections

Empirical surveys and polls are the main tools that political scientists use in order to interpret the political culture of a given country. Results of these surveys are widely used not only in scientific context, but also in newspapers where they are supposed to illustrate people's actual attitudes towards political institutions, decisions and politicians. It seems that this latter use of polls is less problematic, because in these surveys questions are simple and polls are periodically repeated. The simplicity and the repetition give a certain strength to the results of these surveys and, let us not forget, they serve only as illustration: data are supposed to speak for themselves. However, scientific use of empirical surveys raises some serious problems, because it cannot escape the task of theory formulation and interpretation. The conceptual criticisms of Pierre Bourdieu against polls are well-known: questions are always politically pre-formed and often deal with problems which are not really important or relevant for the asked person; surveying is

not a natural situation where people are forced to form an opinion; political knowledge is of communal, public, and praxis-oriented nature which cannot be grasped by the aggregation of individual opinions. Following the spirit of Bourdieu's criticisms a number of problems can be raised about those empirical surveys made in Hungary that undertake the task of interpreting the Hungarian political culture.

Surprising Results

Some surveys results are surprising or even shocking: for instance, the very low level of people's confidence in political institutions. This is, of course, not a problem per se. But it becomes suspicious when other surveys reveal considerably different attitudes (see above the different results regarding people's confidence in political institutions). It is always also strange when surprising or shocking results are produced by a comparison of international data. Generally, studies offer very short descriptions of the methodology used and it is even more so when comparative data are displayed: one cannot be sure what those data really mean. Authors sometime warn the readers about possible caveats and limitations, but still, data are put side-by-side. For instance, Simon (1994) reports that more Romanians than Hungarians think that in case of injustice they would be able to do something; however, after close scrutiny of the questionnaire, it turned out that many Romanians considered aggressive, pre-democratic actions. I have already mentioned the supposed material orientation of Hungarians and Polish, which is taken for granted by many scholars; nevertheless, British data show very similar results; this calls for interpretation. Sometimes political scientists seem to think that data speak for themselves, just like politicians' popularity indexes in the newspapers. But this is not the case, and therefore any mechanical comparison of different data is very questionable. How can one compare opinion polls from the eighties to current surveys, or data from the UK to results of Hungarian or Romanian polls? This is a problem of platitudes. Surveys offer more often platitudinous than surprising results. One reason can be that the questions refer to an issue that is irrelevant for people. In this case, a typical reaction is that answers avoid the extremes: people choose medium or central values, general statements, etc. (See the case of people's self-identification in the left-right scheme, or the survey on political values.) Another reason is that questions are clear; too clear. In this case the hypothesis of the research and the questionnaire reflect something well-known and the result will be uninteresting. (See, for instance, the following research hypothesis: the support of the church's political activity is related to people's attitudes towards the linking of religion and politics. Those who have confidence in religious politics are supposed to support the church's political activity (Robert 1994: 123)).

Crisis-Oriented Interpretations. As a way out of saying nothing, scholars apparently prefer to interpret data as signs of problems. The low confidence in political institutions thus

becomes a sign of a possible legitimation crisis; the lack of clear ideological orientation and party preferences of the voters means that parties have no roots in the society, and so on. It is indeed more interesting and striking to point to the signs of radicalization of opinions, dramatic shifts in political values, and weakening of trust toward political institutions than meticulously, to take into account cultural changes and build convincing theories to explain those changes. For instance, in a recent essay, E. Csizmadia argued that Hungarian political scientists' insistence on the public lack of trust towards political institutions (which is taken to be a main problem by some) lies in a misconception about Hungarian political culture of which patience towards political leaders is a main feature. Surveys that demonstrate the lack of trust and serve as proofs of theories of a legitimation crisis are therefore essentially mistaken. In my view these phenomena are connected to the lack of theories and well-elaborated conceptual frameworks. The lack of an explicit conceptual framework of interpretation means that an implicit framework is used: Hungarian data are interpreted in the light of Western (mostly American) theories and concepts on politics, or in the light of some tacit ideals. This is thus just the essence of the research that disappears: understanding the peculiarities of the Hungarian political culture. In general terms the problem is that of a hermeneutic vicious circle: data cannot be interpreted except in the light of a well-founded theory; however, theories need data in order to be well-founded. To understand this circle is to realize the complexity of the problem of interpreting political culture. Any approach that falls short of taking into account the hermeneutic problem is bound to oversimplify its subject matter and to use ready-made conceptual tools without critical reflection. And, unfortunately, this seems to be the general picture.

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