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Discourse on the Middle Class in Post-Communist Context (Vidurinėsios klasės diskursas postkomunistinėse visuomenėse)

Santrauka. Straipsnyje nagrinėjamos Vakarų teorijų panaudojimo problemos aiškinant socialinius ir kultūrinius pokyčius postkomunistinėse visuomenėse. Viena vertus, tokių teorijų panaudojimas yra grindžiamas šių visuomenių vystymosi link Vakarų išsivysčiusių postindustrinių visuomenių modelio tendencija, kita vertus, teigiama, kad dėl skirtingo konteksto, kuriame buvo sukurtos šios teorijos, jos vargu ar gali paaiškinti postkomunistinių visuomenių raidos savitumus.

Vienas labiausiai diskutuojamų – vidurinėsios klasės probleminis aspektas, kai dažnai kalbama apie vidurinėsios klasės trūkumą ar silpnumą postkomunistinėse šalyse. Šis diskursas tampa ypač politizuotas, kai susiejami vidurinėsios klasės vystymosi ir demokratijos stiprinimo veiksniai, teigiant, kad vidurinioji klasė yra būtina sąlyga stabiliai demokratijai sukurti. Todėl kyla klausimas, kiek vidurinėsios klasės sąvoka gali paaiškinti pokyčių procesą šiose visuomenėse? Ar tai tik 'atsilikimo' metafora lyginant jas su išsivysčiusiomis Vakarų visuomenėmis?

Straipsnyje yra argumentuojama, kad vidurinėsios klasės susiejimas su stabilia demokratija kelia rūpesčių ir Vakarų teoretikams, nes dažnai tas stabilumas remiasi ne tiek demokratinės politinės sistemos palaikymu, kiek nenoru keisti esamą situaciją, siekiant apsaugoti savo ekonominius, statuso ar vartotojiškus interesus. Be to, toks susiejimas nepaaiškina ir šiuolaikinių industrinių visuomenių, kuriose vyrauja vidurinis visuomenės sluoksnis, o taip pat polinkio į ksenofobiją, rasizmą ir kitus, su demokratija nederančius, reiškinius.

Postkomunistinių šalių atveju, importuojant vakarietiškame kontekste suformuotą vidurinėsios klasės sąvoką, susiduriama su akivaizdžiais sunkumais. Visų pirma ši sąvoka turi silpną aiškinamąją galią, nes empirinis vidurinėsios klasės nebuvimo ar silpnumo konstatavimas nieko reikšmingo nepasako apie vykstančių procesų savitumus ar demokratijos vystymąsi. Be to, vyraujantis orientavimasis į vakarietiškus teorinius modelius remiasi tyrimų finansavimu (dažnai – Vakarų fondu) ir labai susiaurina tyrimų tematiką, kai lieka neapartos daug svarbesnės visuomenės problemos. Negana to, tokios sąvokos, kaip 'vidurinioji klasė', 'vartotojiška visuomenė' ar 'pilietinė visuomenė' tampa ne teorinėmis priemonėmis, padedančiomis aiškinti socialinę realybę, bet ideologiniais artefaktais, įteisinančiais ekonominius ar politinius interesus. Tokie negatyvūs Vakarų teorinių modelių taikymo skirtinguose kontekstuose aspektai įkvepia poreikį ieškoti labiau tinkamų teorinių prielaidų ir sąvokų, galinčių paaiškinti vykstančius pokyčius.

Introduction

This essay explores some of the problems involved in using Western theoretical models to explain the process of social and cultural change in post-Communist countries. Up to now sociologists from the newly independent states have not generally offered theoretical analyses of the societies they inhabit, preferring instead to present work with a purely descriptive character. There is,

however, an increasing tendency or them to use, or rather to strain, Western models in examining local conditions. This approach has often been justified by the view that societies emerging from the collapse of the Communist regimes are following the path of Western countries in terms, for example, of the development of democratic governments and market economies.

Given this, the argument goes, sociological theories, which were originally intended to account for the characteristics of the latter may adequately serve as a conceptual blueprint for those seeking to explain social phenomena in the former. Yet such works and theories were developed for very different, and relatively stable, social environments, like Britain or France, and in seeking to sustain a coherent argument, sociologists applying them to, say, Eastern Europe risk overlooking the particularities and diverse cultural patterns found across Western and Eastern European contexts. Moreover, the strong tendency now for Western perspectives to set research agendas for sociological inquiries in the post-Communist world may produce a false, if comforting, view of the real social situation.

That Western sociological concepts have become so fashionable in post-Communist intellectual discourse has had a profound impact on research grant and publishing opportunities, and thus on academic career trajectories. Politically and ideologically coloured topics are now the focus of attention, leading sponsors to support the analysis of such topics at the expense of other equally pressing, though perhaps less effectively marketed, issues. In this way certain issues have practically been ruled out as subjects for academic study and for the moment have little chance of receiving further critical attention.

I would like to illustrate some of these points by inquiring into the applicability in the context of rapidly changing societies of the cluster of concepts centring about the Western notion of the 'middle class'. In the post-Communist world, this notion is perhaps at its most politically charged when it is linked with the claim that the development of a 'middle class' is a precondition for sustainable, Western-style democracy.

The concept of the 'middle class' and its ambiguities

The beginnings of the current debate among post-Communist intellectuals on the issue of the 'middle class' go back to the very start of the social transformations brought about by the collapse of

the Soviet Union. The basis for this debate is the idea that if democracy in changing societies is to be effective and sustainable, then it must be founded not only on the institutionalisation of democratic rule but also on a substantive social group with manifest pro-capitalist and pro-democratic leanings. Despite the many political reforms of the past decade, it seems that support for democracy is dwindling to the extent that post-Communist governments promoting democratic values have met with growing social resistance. In this situation, the artificial creation in emerging post-Communist states of a middle class, the character and function of which are similar to those of the middle class in previously established Western democratic societies, is seen as a viable solution.

The idea of newly creating such a group within the social structure found widespread support among intellectuals almost immediately after the revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe. The belief that the radical renewal of society would depend on fostering and development of a middle class drawn from various sectors of post-Communist society became a cliché of the period, as Peter Rutland points out: "after the collapse of communism, it became a cliché to argue that democracy rests on the shoulders of the middle class and that the best way to produce such a middle class is to unleash market reform" (Rutland 1997; 21). Such views are hardly specific to post-Communist states; actually they are apparent in almost all societies exhibiting tendencies towards the establishment of democracy. After the Second World War, for instance, the United States government made the formation of a middle class a guiding principle for the reconstruction of the defeated states of Europe and Japan. A similar call for the creation of a self-sustaining middle class is frequently being made today in post-war Iraq in the sincere belief that the development of such a class will promote the rise of democratic institutions (Dawisha 2003; 36, 15). These cases as much as the post-Communist ones are bound by the use of the same Western model in terms of a positive relationship between democracy and the middle class.

This notion of the middle class as the social foundation of democracy departs from traditional Western liberal views, which have their roots in the Aristotelian notion of democracy as the ideal polity. Here the middle class prevails as the predominant group and conforms to the Aristotelian virtue of the median since it is neither as hungry as the poor nor as greedy as the rich. Therefore, according to Aristotle, the middle class is more likely than other socio-economic groups to possess the necessary democratic attributes of moderation, tolerance and patience. An Aristotelian middle class is, as Ronald Glassman notes, “a middle class carrying legal-democratic values and able to act as a mediating class between the rich and the poor” (Glassman 1997; 92).

In practice, of course, the term ‘middle class’ is used to describe the emergence of the modern bourgeoisie and democratic capitalist societies. The rise of the bourgeoisie and ‘bourgeois’ notions of individual autonomy, representation and the free play of public opinion led to structural changes during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For Hannes Siegrist, such “new experiences and discourses allowed the emerging middle class to criticise existing conditions, conceive of new social and symbolic orders, and lay claim to leading or mediating positions as well as to central functions and competences in society” (Siegrist 2002; 4). So the bourgeoisie during this early stage of democratic development played a central role in promoting and sustaining a new political and social order. However, in the nineteenth century the bourgeoisie became a focus for fundamental criticisms based on notions of political equality and social justice. By the first half of the twentieth century, as Siegrist notes, opposition to the class as a whole came from groups of very different types, ranging from fascists and cultural conservatives to Communists. The bourgeoisie was also challenged by progressive and democratic critics objecting to its “decadence” and “inability to lead” the democratic reforms of the time (*ibid.*; 5).

The decline of the bourgeoisie’s role in democracy was also influenced by new developments in capitalism. Intensified industrialisation and

increasing bureaucratisation engendered new groups – technocratic, bureaucratic, service and white-collar office workers – who presented themselves as supporters of the established order. Daniel Bell claims that the ‘heart’ of this post-industrial society is a class whose main capital is no longer its ownership of property as in the previous stage of capitalism, but its skills and knowledge attained through higher education (Bell 1973; 212). Members of this new professional class can generate enough wealth to sustain themselves through the sale of their labour alone. In this way the old gaps between workers and the bourgeoisie came to be filled with a growing number of new groups – which we now refer to collectively as the ‘new middle class’ in order to distinguish it from older views of the bourgeoisie.

From the second half of the twentieth century onwards this new middle class became the dominant group in almost all Western democratic states in terms of its size and relative influence on the direction and dynamics of social development. Estimates frequently place the new middle class in the most developed economies at over 50% of the population (Mokrzycki 1995; 223). The old middle class has not disappeared, but it has certainly declined in relative numbers and influence (Glassman 1997; 92) and has become increasingly differentiated from the rest of the middle class. It would seem, then, that the development of advanced contemporary democracies has largely been the responsibility of the ‘new middle class’.

Nevertheless, the relation between the new middle class and democracy is not so unambiguous. Glassman recalls the pessimistic views of Max Weber and C. Wright Mills about the erosion of parliamentary democracy under the pressure of increased bureaucracy. This process is closely related to Mills’s warning about the differences of character and circumstance between the independent and entrepreneurial old middle class and the salaried, conformist and bureaucratically entangled new middle class. He believed that the new middle class would become locked into the status hierarchy of one giant bureaucracy or other, and that they would not be able to exert any inde-

pendent democratic influence upon the society at large (Glassman 1997; 93).

Interestingly, very few of the numerous arguments in post-Communist states for the crucial role of the middle class in bringing about effective democracy make any distinction between the old and new middle class. In current discourse the middle class is mainly associated with property ownership and it is perhaps for this very reason that a positive correlation between the group and support for democracy prevails. If an effective democracy rests on a middle class base, on a mass of property-owners, it is because of the following three main arguments.

The first argument is the assumption that social inequalities, if permitted to grow, would result in injustice and become a danger to democracy. For example, Bloom and others following him claim that the larger and stronger the middle class, the more stable society becomes. In this view, the creation of the state as a system means first of all the enlargement, maintenance and strengthening of the middle class, which may then act as a buffer preventing the gap between the elite and the masses from becoming so wide that it threatens the stability of society. Here the political elite must seek to protect the middle class for the sake of the state (Blom 1995; 18). A similar line of argument can be also found in the works of post-Communist researchers. Henrik Domanski, for instance, claims that “because the middle class seeks to raise its socio-economic welfare, it is a basis of political stability, thus all governments usually consider the demands of this class, and the majority of political campaigns also are oriented towards the middle class to secure its political support (Domanski 1995; 335).

The second common argument is that the middle class normally provides a stability feature to the country because of the unwillingness of its members to lose their property, and third argument is based on the assumption that members of the middle class are involved in the democratic process simply because they have the time and the money to participate. This last assumption also has echoes in democratic theory, which holds that independent and self-sustaining middle classes create the basis

for democratic civil life. Nevertheless, it cannot be forgotten that, “the experience of Latin America and of interwar Lithuania with their vice for authoritarian sentiments showed that civil society activity does not always mean strong liberal democracy” (Šaulauskas 2000; 30).

Here questions about the reasons for such a dominant pattern arise. For Rutland, part of the problem is different emphases in defining the ‘middle class’. In general, this term in the United States denotes a certain standard of living: well-paid manual workers usually see themselves as ‘middle class’. In Europe, the definitions tend to be more political, denoting a certain set of values or professional background and a sense of distance from the working class (Rutland 1997; 18). On closer inspection, it appears that there is no clear definition of the middle class – different approaches offer different definitions based on, for example, profession, power, above-average income, education, prestige, autonomy, salaried non-manual work, or high material living standards. Some segments fulfil one criterion, while some fulfil others, reflecting the great differentiation within the class and making analysis even more complicated. So, statements about the ‘middle class’ and its relation to democracy are shaped by the selections authors make from the various definitions and sections of the class available at any time.

On the other hand, the fact that in almost all developing democracies the emphasis is placed, more than anything else, on living standards in relation to the ‘middle class’, also reflects the dominant theoretical approach based on United States society. This particular approach to the issue has its own strengths and weaknesses. Among its strengths is the theoretical possibility of finding in almost all developing democracies, and indeed in most other societies too, at least some self-employed and propertied groups of people. This applies to Malaysia, Taiwan, South Korea, Latin America countries, and also Iraq (Dawisha 2003; 36). The case of the post-Communist countries, however, especially in the early years of their transformation, seems to be an uncomfortable exception in this regard, lacking a credible middle

class of any kind (Rona-Tas 1996; 29–44). The main problem here is the insensitivity on the part of researchers towards the particularities of the social, economic and cultural contexts of diverse societies. Instead a common concept of the ‘middle class’ is employed across diverse contexts, even though this concept was developed in societies where democracy more naturally evolved from middle-class initiatives and had relatively stable external conditions almost throughout its development.

The notion of the middle class described above, when applied across diverse contexts, reveals not only its own inflexibility but also raises more general questions about the supposedly positive relationship between the class and democracy. In relation to this, Francis Loh in his analysis of Malaysian society argues that democratic development, “is seriously limited by the middle class priority of sustained growth brought about by economic but not political liberalization” (in Amoroso 2002). Given this, “having attained identity and lifestyle through personalized, not social, achievement, individuals are not inclined to controversial political involvement that can adversely threaten them” (ibid.). Even in well-established European democracies, such as France and Austria, election results often suggest that the middle class see xenophobic nationalism as a credible political alternative (Mokrzycki 1995; 223).

In one sense, then, the middle class can be seen traditionally as a precondition for democracy, in another, as amenable to authoritarian regimes when its interests are endangered. As Rutland puts it,

it provides a sufficient level of economic activity, stability of institutions, and also respect for a number of norms including decency in the conduct of economic transactions and the management of public affairs. But the middle class can also follow unscrupulous leaders to preserve its need for security (Rutland 1997; 21).

Moreover, Mokrzycki, writing of the prevailing discourse about the relation of the middle class and market-based democracy, notes that:

it is a misunderstanding, resulting from the mixing up of correlate and cause, that the middle class is being promoted and stimulated in its development

in order to support market reforms. The middle class, in all its meanings, even as the petty bourgeoisie, is just as much a creator of the market as its product (Mokrzycki 1995; 236).

Thus the middle class, from this point of view, is a product of the capitalist system and performs an essential role as a secondary reinforcement of the system.

These insights, along with an awareness of the possibilities for the new middle class to foster democracy, have led some academics to argue that, “perhaps the term ‘middle class’ is merely a myth of market democracy, increasingly devoid of sociological content” (Rutland 1997; 21). The questionable usefulness of the concept of the middle class and the disruptive effects of a prevalent Western theoretical schema can be illustrated with a more detailed analysis of Central and Eastern Europe and particularly of current Lithuanian realities.

The ‘middle class’ approach in a post-Communist context: the case of Lithuania

Despite the criticisms of the middle-class approach in Western social science, there have been many attempts in post-Communist societies to prove the existence of such a group, or to create it by means of protectionist laws and policies. However, in line with a worldwide tendency, the concept of the middle class is associated more with property owners (Mokrzycki 1995; 223) than with, say, technocrats, professionals or white-collar workers in administration or the service sphere. In the case of the post-Communist countries, the reason for this identification of the middle class with property owners, and more specifically self-employed small traders, may partly be that those who would more closely resemble the Western ‘new middle class’ in terms of occupation were pauperised during the neo-liberal reforms carried out by governments immediately after independence. In these circumstances, that the idea of fostering the growth of the middle class justified all programmes of privatisation and re-privatisation (ibid.) was hardly surprising.

The tendency to attribute a middle-class status to small traders or even simply to those with higher incomes is prevailing not only among state officials but also among large sections of post-Communist society. Various surveys of self-evaluations of socio-economic status show that the majority of Lithuanians identify themselves with groups of lower socio-economic status. Those who locate themselves further up the social ladder are very few – less than 1%. Despite the effects of age and education differences on the results of these surveys, the basis of criteria for such self-assessment is mostly incomes (Tureikytė 1996; 336).

Thus it can be seen that the dominant United-States notion of the ‘middle class’ as defined by a certain standard of living has the unexpected consequence of favouring entrepreneurs rather than numerous other groups that could form the dominant new middle class as found in the developed democracies. Due to the rejection of the ‘third way’ by neo-liberals in favour of the ‘first’, capitalist way, Central Europe is simulating the original capitalist cycle of development. Here the ‘knowledge class’ or new middle class is unimportant in comparison with private property owners (Mokrzycki 1995; 234).

Nevertheless, paradoxically, the implementation of favourable laws and privatisation did not result in the expected tremendous enlargement of small property owners, at least in Lithuania. At the end of the first decade of the transformation, the initial increase in the number of small businesses has reversed itself, mainly because of the high rate of bankruptcy. The explanation for this is twofold: the increased monopolisation and dominance of large companies as well as the lack of entrepreneurial skills and positive attitudes towards them. According to 1998 statistics, nearly 70% of people explain their unwillingness to start businesses of their own by declaring that they do not have the capacities, or do not know where to start and fear the financial responsibility (Gruževskis 2000; 65).

Even if a unified model of the middle class (based on incomes and political values alike) is employed in the Lithuanian situation, the empirical evidence shows up a critically weak middle class

both in terms of a lack of material resources and vague political attitudes very far from an unqualified support of democracy. Almost all of the surveys agree that according to the level of incomes, Lithuanian society bears little relation to a middle class society at all – 16% of the population lives below the poverty level, while a further 29% is made up of extremely poor people (Leonavičius 2002; 6). Even when viewed from the perspective of the most friendly criterion of higher education, the Lithuanian ‘middle class’ is very small – 19% of the working population (Dargytė-Burokienė 1999; 153). Such a situation, therefore, has led some researchers to conclude that where only the United-States notion of the ‘middle class’ is employed, then Lithuanian society in marked contrast with Western states, “does not correspond with the stable democratic society model” (Taljunaitė 1995; 35).

It is not only the large gap between the well-off and those with low incomes that serves as an argument against the existence of a middle class in post-Communist societies. Another argument deals with political attitudes, which are not significantly different between members of the ‘middle class’ and the rest of the population. If ‘small property owners’ alone are taken into account as the representatives of a middle class, then most research suggests that this social group in Central and Eastern Europe has no sociological makeup as a class, let alone a class capable of grassroots support for social reforms. Rather, it is a group devoid of internal coherence, an ideological platform or political representation. It is a ‘class’ unable to articulate its interests and expressing no particular preferences for liberal values (Mokrzycki 1995; 237).

If, following the ‘new middle class’ definition, managers and professionals despite their lack of financial resources are included in middle-class ranks, then the picture would be quite different, since these two groups in most post-Communist countries have more liberal and democratic political preferences. In a 1999 survey of European values, managers and professionals were the most likely to support democracy. They stated that to have a democratic political system is very positive and that, while democracy may have its problems, it is better

than any other form of government. The political preferences of more routine non-manual employees and especially those of workers were not nearly so clearly expressed (Geciene 2004; 492).

Nevertheless, these differences are not so convincing and preferences differ quite significantly from one election to another. Some researchers blame economic and political anomie for the lack of impact of socio-economic status on voting behaviour or other political attitudes (Nieuwbeerta 1998; 138–57). Others argue that such a situation is close to a tendency that has recently gained prominence in the electoral politics of the advanced industrial democracies, in which patterns of electoral choice in many new democracies may be based more on the same short-term factors – candidate images and issue positions – rather than on class position (Dalton 1996). However, it seems in general that the majority of people support democracy not because they belong to middle-class ranks but, as in Germany after Nazism, because of their opposition to the previous regime: they want “to assure that they would never lose their liberties to a similar regime again” (Brooke 1997). This suggests that democracy may not be merely rooted in long-lasting traditions, but a form of learned behaviour as well.

It seems that Lithuanian society has certain defining characteristics separating it from more typical contemporary middle-class Western societies. First of all, there is the lack of a wealthy new middle class and of an established old middle class supporting democratic values. Nevertheless, during the first decade of the transformation a democratic order was fully institutionalised and support for democracy and the spread of democratic values became significant. Beyond this, and despite some sentimentality about the previous life of relative stability and security, few people now would welcome the restraints imposed by the former Communist regime on civil rights and personal freedoms. It could be said then that the values of democracy and of a market economy are entrenched in the minds of Lithuanian people (Gaidys 2000; 195).

Moreover, younger people are much more pro-

democracy and pro-market, enjoying the newfound possibilities of studying abroad and the new prospects of European Union enlargement. As Vladas Gaidys argues, younger people have mastered the principles of democracy and civil society, while one survey shows that they were socialised in much more democratically favourable circumstances: of the respondents 70% of 18–29 year-olds (as opposed to just over 30% of 60–74 year-olds) wrote that their families respected their opinion, while almost 35% of 18–29 year-olds (as against just under 12% of the older generation) said that they had the possibility of expressing their discontent in school and actively used it (Gaidys 2000; 181).

Given this, it does seem that, despite the lack of a Western-style middle class, Lithuanian society has some strong potential for sustaining a stable democracy. A quite analogous situation was found in an analysis of consumer society in Lithuania. Actually in the Western tradition a consumer society is closely related with the middle class because of the latter's dependence on the economic status of the individual. Leonavicius states that despite the absence of consumer society in Lithuania (mainly because there are far fewer possibilities to consume) in comparison with Western models, a very large part of society (close to 70%) have values and attitudes which are characteristic of the modern consumer society: the need for self-expression and firmly established ecological attitudes (Leonavičius 2002; 15).

In the light of these factors it can be assumed that the democratic status of Lithuanian society is best understood not by its middle-class characteristics but by examining its values and attitudes towards democracy, its past experience of non-democratic rule and the suppression of civil liberties and human rights, as well as by the favourable international context characterised by the spread of democracy and market economy. This also applies to, for instance, German democracy, which was also an effect of external influence (Brooke 1997; 2), while Neil Englehart in his study of new democracy in Thailand points out that, “although democratisation in Thailand is often seen as an

illustration of modernization theory, the extent of middle class support for democracy is actually unclear". He concludes that, "the greatest advance for Thai democracy in the 1990s was the passage of the 1997 Constitution, more closely linked to economic globalisation than modernization" (Englehart 2003; 253, 27).

Maybe Lithuanian society, as with many post-Communist states, develops in a highly particular way by making an odd jump from non-democratic processes towards e-democracy, echoing its previous jump from a pre-modern condition to a high-tech state without following the more steady stages of development seen in Western societies? It may even contain within itself the possibility of becoming a more vital democratic society, where the functional counterparts of the Western middle class are more aware about the development of democracy than their peers in well-established democracies? As Glassman notes, writing of the overwhelming drive among Eastern European countries towards democracy despite having had some of the strongest bureaucracies and tools of social control under Communism: "balancing the heavy pessimism of Weber and Mills, the recent events in Eastern Europe have generated a new optimism about the possibilities for democracy in the modern world, and the limits of bureaucracy" (Glassman 1997; 92).

Conclusion

The essential purpose of this essay has been to ask: what explanatory power does the term 'middle class' (or 'consumer society' for that matter) have in the analysis of post-Communist societies? Does the term really help us to understand the actual situation within the rapidly changing societies of the region, or does it serve only as a powerful metaphor of their 'backwardness' in comparison with Western ones?

More specifically, as we have seen, when planning to undertake research on post-Communist societies, one faces the problem of the use of sociological models. Due to their own orientation towards developed market democracies in the West-

ern world, social researchers from the region have tended to use typological Western models based on the characteristics of Western states. What, though, to paraphrase Leonavičius (Leonavičius 2002; 5), is the implication of asking about the nature of the middle class in Lithuania, when the answer is generally based on characteristics of social behaviour specifically formulated for Western societies? It is actually to ask what Lithuania is not by contrast with Western models: if Lithuanians differ from Westerners in this regard, it is because they are not on the proper level in respect to the development of democracy.

Even between Western sociologists there is some agreement that traditional Western theories are not so helpful when it comes to describing Central and Eastern European realities (Piirainen 1995). Siegrist, for example, has argued that studies identifying bourgeois and middle class groups in these areas on the basis of theoretical premises and European concepts rarely do justice to their subject matter. According to him, when concepts of the bourgeoisie or the middle class are imported and extended to superficially similar phenomena, their meaning changes significantly (Siegrist 2002; 4). Comparisons may well show, for example, that institutional, economic and technical innovations, which in Western and Central European history are associated with the bourgeoisie, are planned and carried out by other actors and groups in those areas without a bourgeoisie. In such cases, it is not very helpful to apply the concept of the bourgeoisie to such groups (*ibid.*).

To sum up, the difficulties of using the concept 'middle class' (or those of 'consumer society' or 'civil society', etc.) in the post-Communist world point to doubts about the advantages of 'importing' Western concepts and sociological models to diverse historical, economic, political and socio-cultural contexts. If we do use them as purely descriptive tools for analysing post-Communist social reality, then it quickly becomes apparent that such phenomena as the middle class and civil society hardly exist, at least not in the form they take in Western countries. To respond in the negative to the research question 'Is there a middle class?' is to

say nothing about particular social realities or about the degree of democratic development.

The practice of transferring Western theoretical tools to other social contexts is hardly new. We need only think of the transfer of United States modernisation theory to explain the 'backwardness' of Latin America. The theory and its constituent elements did not fit these societies precisely because the theory succeeded only in showing them up as backward in terms of the modernisation process. Of course the solution to this 'problem' was subsequently to transfer the values, economic practices and political principles of the United States. In this way, scientific concepts paved the way for ideological, political and economic dominance. In opposition to these tendencies, there appeared the dependence theories – Latin American intellectual products based on a close understanding of the history of the continent. Such theories held out alternative notions but only as an implicit critique of modernisation theory. Therefore every researcher must be aware of encoded political values within theories and concepts of social sciences (Kraniauskas 2002).

Similarly, the enormous emphasis placed on the middle class in post-Communist intellectual discourse makes one aware that this concept is used not so much as a theoretical tool in explaining social reality than as an 'ideological artefact', as Mokrzycki notes (Mokrzycki 1995; 232). On the one hand, this concept may serve as an ideological tool for legitimising highly particular economic or political interests and policies. For example, recent debates on long-term population strategy have revealed a tendency for state policy to meet middle-class in terms of a healthy lifestyle, environment, education, and so on. Here the country's population strategy is oriented only towards tiny percentages of the population and as such erodes the democratic principle of equal opportunity.

On the other hand, the predominance of a Western perspective in setting research agendas for

sociological enquiry limits the examination and understanding of real processes in changing post-Communist societies. The prevalence of the 'middle class' and certain other Western sociological terms in intellectual discourse (in politics and the mass media as well as the academy) has had a profound impact on research grant and publishing opportunities, on possibilities to organise conferences or seminars, and consequently on academic careers. Other, no less important, topics (for example, the great expansion of the bureaucracy and the sharp reduction of popular influence over decision-making) have been struck from academic and political agendas. The financial dependence of social researchers on technical evaluation, a narrow range of funding bodies and research agendas set by local and international institutions seriously restricts the ability of the social sciences to have a positive influence on decision-making in their respective countries (Etzioni-Halevy 1993; 2).

In conclusion, the common practice of transferring Western models to the East points towards the dominance of Western political programmes in setting research agendas and in attracting sponsorship for academic work. It also reveals an ideological manipulation of theoretical assumptions, employing otherwise quite artificial models for the construction of compliant social structures, or at least presenting a simulacrum of them from above. Such negative effects simultaneously lead us to look critically at any direct application of Western concepts to the post-Communist world and inspire us to look for more adequate approaches and theories with which to explain the social reality of the region. In order to escape the erroneous use of imported concepts it is more fruitful, according to the most penetrating post-Communist accounts of the situation, to analyse these societies by induction and by the creation of new conceptions, rather than through a deduction methodology based on existing theoretical traditions (Taljunaitė 1999; 13).

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SUMMARY

DISCOURSE ON THE MIDDLE CLASS IN POST-COMMUNIST CONTEXT

The focus of this article is to reveal some ambiguities existing in discourse on middle class, particularly on causal relationship between the middle class and democracy, and to show some risk in applying such Western theoretical framework in post-Communist context. Therefore, the essential purpose has been to ask: what explanatory power does the term 'middle class' have in the analysis of post-Communist societies? Does the term really help us to understand the actual situation within the rapidly changing societies of the region, or does it serve only as a powerful metaphor of their 'backwardness' in comparison with Western ones?

The practice of transferring Western theoretical tools to other social contexts is hardly new. We need only think of the transfer of United States modernisation theory to explain the 'backwardness' of Latin America. The theory and its constituent elements did not fit these societies precisely because the theory succeeded only in showing them up as backward in terms of the modernisation process. Similarly, if to use the concept of the middle class as purely descriptive tool for analysing post-Communist social reality, then it quickly becomes apparent that such phenomenon as the middle

class hardly exist, at least not in the form it takes in Western countries. However, such implication says nothing about particular social realities or about the degree of democratic development in post-Communist countries.

The enormous emphasis placed on the middle class in post-Communist intellectual discourse makes one aware that this concept is used not so much as a theoretical tool in explaining social reality than as an 'ideological artefact'. Therefore, we can speak about signs of an ideological manipulation of theoretical assumptions, employing otherwise quite artificial models for the construction of compliant social structures, or at least presenting a simulacrum of them from above. Besides, the common practice of transferring Western models to the East points towards the dominance of Western political programmes in setting research agendas and in attracting sponsorship for academic work. Such negative effects simultaneously lead us to look critically at any direct application of Western concepts to the post-Communist world and inspire us to look for more adequate approaches and theories with which to explain the social reality of the region.

Įteikta 2005 10 10

Pateikta spaudai 2005 10 29

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