Reproductive Strategies of Coping with Distrust in Politics: The Case of the Post-communist Czech Republic

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Democracies of post-communist states are usually seen as weak because of the low level of civil participation and low trust in formal political institutions. In the Czech Republic, where the environment of distrust is one of its key characteristics of these days, both citizens and politicians have to deal with this fact. Drawing upon interviews from a student research project, which contained ninety interviews with non-politicians and thirty interviews with politicians, several widespread strategies of coping with the lack of trust have been identified. On the side of ‘lay people,’ the distrust in politics can lead to condemning politics as a whole, ignoring politics, blaming the history, or searching for alternatives. Politicians use similar strategies such as denying of being a politician, ignoring the public for being incompetent, blaming the history/other politicians, or believing in a change. All these strategies contribute to the preservation of so called post-communist political culture and obstruct the further democratization.

1. Introduction

The recent literature has devoted increasing attention to the political distrust. Under the condition of political distrust, both citizens and politicians have to deal with the fact that they cannot believe blindly in political processes. Citizens have to count with the possibility that politicians do not always keep their promises and politicians have to count with the fact that they have to gain the credibility. Trust is especially important for ‘new democracies’, where democratic political structures have not yet fully settled. In this paper, I focus on cases when the distrust occurs and when people emphasize their doubts and a low opinion of politics.

Drawing upon narrative interviews on the political development in the post-communist Czech Republic, I examine how both citizens and politicians talk about politics as
a specific kind of human agency, i.e. how they discursively create an image of politics as ‘dirty’ or unfunctional sphere, and how they reproduce the broad distrust in politics.

2. Erosion of political trust in literature

A spectre is haunting political researchers - the spectre of distrust in politics. In the last decades, political distrust, as a threat for the concept of representative democracy, has become a common topic for political research (for example, Levi and Stoker 2000, Dalton and Weldon 2005, Hetherington and Husser 2012). In order to grasp this phenomenon, scholars fight over the conceptualization of trust and the interpretation of the broad decrease of trust in political institutions and politics in general. Despite of numerous attempts to create a common definition of political trust, there is only a consensus that political trust can be defined as a multi-level and multi-dimensional concept. Among its key characteristics, trust contains relational judgements reflecting “beliefs about the trustworthiness” of others or of a category of people/group/institution (Levi and Stoker 2000). More concretely, trust is a ratio of people’s evaluation of political performance relative to normative expectations of how political actors ought to perform (Hetherington and Husser 2012: 313). The decreasing political trust is linked with phenomena such as anti-party sentiment, which refers to the perception of growing public disenchantment with parties and negative public image of political parties (Dalton and Weldon 2005).

In the context of CEE studies, authors usually stress the context of post-communism and its relevance for prevailing political distrust, because distrust is “the predicted legacy of Communist rule” (Mishler and Rose 1997) as a logical consequence of the mass alienation which had developed under state socialism (Tong 1995). The argument about the weak civil society in CEE region (Howard 2002) is supported by the image of the specific post-communist situation and cultural path-dependency. This argument has two crucial implications. Firstly, it evokes an image of passive actors who just reproduce repeatedly old cultural patterns. As they were socialized in the era of communism, their views and beliefs still differ from the rest of
the world. Secondly, the major source of the current distrust is rooted in the era of communism. Both implications are disputable. In the case of the Czech Republic, I show that the prevailing distrust in politics has more causes than just the communist past. Laying on narrative interviews from a student research project, I depict actors who are active and creative in reproducing/changing cultural reality of distrust through their usage of symbolic performatives.

3. Let’s talk about politics

As a part of a broad research projects capturing the Czech political culture, me and my colleagues (Miroslav Grznár, Tomáš Samec, and Lucie Černá) have run a series of interviews concerning the political development in last decades in the Czech Republic. With the help of younger students, we have collected a set of ninety interviews with lay people, usually students’ parents in the age around 40-60 years and thirty interviews with politicians at the similar age, who were either active in Czech politics in the early nineties, or those who have come into politics under the flag of a new strong political party ANO 2011, which is characteristic by an anti-partying rhetoric.

We have used a narrative form of interviewing as it was a suitable form for capturing the impressions from the political development of last decades. Moreover, we agree with the assumption that “humans have a natural tendency to think in narrative form” (Shenhav 2006: 245). Even if we did not conduct a classical narrative analysis, we used narrative as a research tool for gathering data which are rich with meanings and contexts. Narratives are justified in many field of inquiry, including the political research, because “narratives affect our perceptions of political reality, which in turn affect our actions in response to or in anticipation of political events” (Patterson and Monroes 1998: 315). The interviews were semi-biographic, focused on personal stories and “big narratives” about the meaning of a specific time period.

The main output of the research was a typology of rhetorical repertoires which people use in order to relate themselves to the realm of politics. We have identified four of these possible positions: a) interested repertoire; b) objective repertoire; c) alienated repertoire; d)
interested repertoire (see Grznár et al 2014; Grznár and Beránková 2016). The following research project aims at the image of politics and its symbolic boundaries which are created/reshaped/crossed. In order to capture these processes, I am intending to enlarge the sample of interviewee with political activists and to proceed multi-case study of politicians who have background in social movements. In this paper, I look back at the existing set of narrative data and reanalysed them in order to capture the evaluation of politics as a whole.

4. Constructing the image of politics as a cultural performance and framing

As an abstract notion, the image of politics is (re)created, shared, and changed by way of speaking about it. Talks as symbolic performatives create shared meanings which shaped social reality. Especially in the case of politics, where the gain of a mandate relies on the conviction of a sufficient amount of voters. Looking at the image of politics from the point of view of pragmatic cultural sociology, we do not have to deal with cognitive strategies and concrete intentions, as they are hidden to us. We analyse shared meanings just as they are, because these give us the picture of cultural patterns which lies behind the actual behaviour.

This pragmatic cultural approach to inquiry of political culture is epistemologically rooted in the famous article by Ann Swidler, Culture in action: Symbols and strategies (1986). Swidler rejects a definition of culture as a set of measurable values and she argues that values have a little explanatory power. Swidler’s definition of culture is rather based on a set of cultural tools, „a tool-kit of symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views, which people may use in varying configuration to solve different kinds of problems“ (Swidler 1986: 273). This pragmatic approach to culture does not care about individual motivations of actors, it is rather focused on the construction of meanings in concrete situations. In other words, pragmatic cultural sociology concerns about cultural production in interactions, not about cultural consumption.

Swidler explicitly relates her thoughts to Max Weber, when she states a thesis that “interests are the engine of action” (ibid.: 274). So she depicts strategies of action as cultural products and she claims that “culture provides a repertoire of capacities from which varying
strategies of action may be constructed” (ibid.: 284). This idea of cultural actions is very similar to Alexander’s *cultural pragmatics* (Alexander 2011) as a symbolic game, as a performance, where we focus on the game with meanings, not on the inner motivations, cognitions, or thoughts of concrete actors.

One of the basic cultural processes which is observed by cultural sociologist is framing. Based on the frame analysis by Erving Goffman, we can distinguish heterogeneous practical application of the concept of frames. In general, frames are shared definitions of situations and the answer to the question “what’s happening?” (Goffman 1974: 1). Frame analysis rather a broad interpretative approach how to read the data than a rigid methodology of analysis. Scheff (2005) interprets Goffman’s frame analysis as an attempt to inquire the context of meanings and frames as basic description and understanding of the situation. In the context of cultural sociology, frames are seen as cultural structures (Lamont et al 2014: 575). Laying on the conceptualization of social movements framing by Benford and Snow (1988: 199), we can distinguish three types of framing: a) diagnostic framing (identification of a problem and its characteristics); b) prognostic framing (strategies of acting); c) motivational (motivations for a collective action).

5. **The case of the Czech Republic**

There is no doubt that the Czech society suffers from the lack of trust in political institutions and politics in general. However, arguing only by the communist past overshadows other sources of political distrust. As a new democracy, the Czech Republic went through the phase of a general disappointment from a slow transformation, which can be labelled as “honeymoon effect”. Moreover, there were several corruption scandals (Appel 2001) and political crises, so the renewed trust in politics, which went along with the euphoria from the new democratic regime, was cooled down. Above that, there is the broader trend of dissatisfaction with the politics, as there is the “evidence of growing public disenchantment with parties has spread across Western democracies“ (Dalton, Weldon 2005).
In the Czech Republic, the commonly shared expectations in the beginning of nineties were so positive, that the frustration of the follow-up development was quite vivid. There were several significant themes of this feeling in our interviews. It was a mixture of disappointment that the Czech society do not have the western standard of living, disappointment with slow policy reforms, ineffective political negotiations, corruption scandals, and the behaviour of elites in general. And on the other hand also a quite common sentiment (with different intensity) for the times with the minimum inequalities, secured job positions, zero unemployment and cheap foodstuffs. This heterogeneous mixture of discursive mems on disappointment and rising opinion divides across the whole society lead to the situation of so called “bad mood”.

6. Reproducing the image of political distrust

The lack of political trust and the negative public image of politics leads to a battle over meanings of politics in general. Prevailing political scepticism is reproduced through the way of talking about politics and politicians. For further conceptualization of political trust, I suggest to distinguish different objects and scope of distrust (see the following table). Whereas the differential distrust does not apply for the politics as a whole, the generalized distrust contains a major scepticism. The differential distrust is linked to the evaluation of concrete people, concrete affairs, and concrete facts, so it does not imply the shared image of untrustworthy political environment. On the other hand, the generalized distrust contains a belief that there is a structural problem which make impossible to trust in politicians, in parties, or in the representative democracy.
Conceptualization of political distrust

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The object of distrust</th>
<th>Differential distrust</th>
<th>Generalized distrust</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Politicians</td>
<td>Distrust in concrete politicians</td>
<td>Distrust in all politicians as a homogenous category</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parties</td>
<td>Distrust in concrete pol. parties</td>
<td>Distrust in political parties as a dysfunctional institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>System</td>
<td>Distrust in the current form of representative democracy</td>
<td>Distrust in the whole system of representative democracy or the state in general</td>
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Regarding generalized political distrust, four distinguishable frames have occurred during the interviews. The first one could be called ‘naturalism’. It takes place when people talk about politics as a naturally filthy business, so they believe it is an inevitable attribute of any society. In such context, no action is needed, so one can only reconcile with this ‘fact’. The second way of depicting the distrust is ‘determinism’, which means that the narrator ascribes the generalized distrust to the past. The third possible frame is ‘resignation’, when people even do not want to talk about politics, because they think it is pointless and without any sense, as politics does not matter at all. The fourth way of talking on politics is ‘realism’, which happens when someone believes the bad political condition is only a matter of an unfavourable constellation which is transient and not necessary.
Framing generalized political distrust

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frame</th>
<th>Typical expressions of voters</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Naturalization</td>
<td>Reconciliation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Determinism</td>
<td>Excusing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resignation</td>
<td>Escape</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realism</td>
<td>Transformation</td>
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Politics is a naturally filthy business. Power corrupts people.

Politics is affected by the past (esp. communism).

Politics does not matter at all.

Politics is currently untrustworthy because of the bad constellation of parties and politicians.

Basic reproductive strategies for dealing with generalized political distrust

Within the interviews, there were several distinguishable performative strategies (ideal types) how people deal with the fact of political distrust. These strategies assume that the narrator actively reproduces the image of prevailing distrust and he counts with that as it is a social fact. On the side of “lay people”, we can identify the escape strategy of ignoring politics, condemning politics as a whole, blaming the history, or searching for alternatives.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrators</th>
<th>“lay” people</th>
<th>Politicians</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reconciliation</td>
<td>Condemning politics as a whole</td>
<td>Blaming the public for being incompetent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excusing</td>
<td>Blaming the history</td>
<td>Blaming the history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Escape</td>
<td>Ignoring politics</td>
<td>Denying to be a politician</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transformation</td>
<td>Searching for alternatives</td>
<td>Offering alternative ways of action</td>
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Those who condemn politics as a whole, do not believe in any change. Their strategy contains a belief that politics is a rotten way of doing things and it is an eternal truth. This strategy is not necessarily connected with the non-participation by elections. It is rather a pragmatic conviction that not believing in politics is better than be disappointed.

Karel  “It doesn’t matter who rules just now. They are all the same and they do it only for money.”

Another strategy of coping with the political distrust is blaming the past. This approach is based on historical determinism and on the faith that there is a strong path dependency in the way of developing democracy.

Petr  “Because of the communism, the society has been deformed. And it still is.”

Dissatisfaction with the current political situation and the explicit statement of distrust is linked with searching for alternatives, political or non-political. Marketing experts of political parties build often upon this attitude by defining against the current political representation, so it is a common strategy for the opposition. A quite surprising can be a claim that as an alternative can be seen also a communist party.

Marie  “I hate that current political crap. I rather vote for communists. They would change it.”

The strategy driven from the political alienation is based on explicit ignorance of political reality as a whole, so the fact that the narrator does not trust in politics leads to an escape strategy. It is a resignation on expressing any opinion related to political processes. By using this strategy, the narrator depicts politics as an immoral, repulsive sphere, which is better to ignore than get angry with.
Anna  “I don’t care about politics. Why should I? It’s not important to me. I don’t even want to watch TV, it would get me angry, so I rather read books.”

On the side of politicians, we can see that their strategies react to these four frames: blaming the public for being incompetent, blaming the history, denying to by a politician, offering alternative ways of action. Recently, the most visible strategy is the articulated identity of non-politicians. One of the strongest political parties, ANO 2011, had a whole campaign based on the claim that the candidates are not politicians ("We are not like politician. We work hard"). Even the current minister of finance (ANO 2011) says that he is not a politician at all. During the interviews we have heard similar expressions. The following quotations comes from an interview which I have led with a member of parliament.

Pavel (a member of ANO 2011)

“I’m not a politician at all I’m just an active citizen. I still have my GP praxis, it is my backup plan for rainy days.”

7. Conclusion

Regardless the prevailing idea that a big amount of voters (real or potential) in the Czech Republic do not believe in politics, by doing so, they reproduce the post-communist political culture which is characterized by political scepticism, I have shown that not only voters contribute to establishing the environment of distrust, politicians do so as well. By acknowledging that the politics is an untrustworthy sphere of society, they contribute to the prevailing of the generalized political distrust. On the other hand, politicians try to make themselves an exception that proves the rule. By doing so, they try to gain the trust of publics,
but simultaneously, they undermine the credibility of other politicians, parties, and the system of the representative democracy as well.

Another point of mine is the remark that distrust in politics is not only a matter of passive resignation. Narrators who reconstruct the idea of untrustworthy political reality do that in different ways. It is not only about a single statement that politicians/parties/system cannot be trusted. It is rather a spectrum of creative diagnosis of the current political reality; from simple generalization of politics as “filthy business” to blaming the history. Seeing the prevailing distrust in politics as a heritage of post-communism can overshadow the fact that political distrust is actively reproduced by narrated meanings shared in interactions.

All identified strategies of reproducing the political distrust obstruct further democratization because they confirm the “filthy” status of current politics. In order to improve the image of politics, supporter of functional representative democracy should be aware of these narrative strategies which reproduce the distrust. Counting with such narratives can be helpful for creating adequate arguments and contra-narratives which can oppose them.

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**References**


