The Implications of Adaptation Discourse for Post-communist Working Classes

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This article analyzes the implications of adaptation discourse in post-communist societies for the working classes. I begin with a brief outline of the local and global processes at the heart of post-communist transitions and then look at the adaptation discourse as a response to these socio-economic changes. I continue by focusing on the representations of working classes in the framework of the adaptation discourse and conclude by a critique of this discourse as marginalizing the post-communist working classes and as uncritically legitimating the system of class inequalities.

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to examine the role of post-communist adaptation discourse in reassessment of class inequalities resulting from the transition to a market economy. By “adaptation discourse” I will refer to a discussion in post-communist societies about the extent to which people are said to be adapting to new social realities. According to Zlobina, all people in post-communist societies can be divided into three major categories: (1) those who have successfully mastered the skills of selling their personal abilities and/or labor power and achieved high positions in the market economy; (2) those who are in the process of adaptation; and (3) those who found it more difficult to “adapt,” ending up in lower positions. Symonchuk describes people who have adapted successfully as constituting the “new middle class” and as a foundation of society. On the contrary, “old working classes” (generally consisting of industrial manual workers in the traditional sectors of the economy) are presented in a negative light as “losers” of the transition or even “holding the country down and setting back reform” by not adapting (Kideckel). Within this framework a further distinction is
also made among the “affluent workers,” who are well-adapted to new conditions and sell their manual skills to individual customers, and the “underclass”—unemployed and disaffiliated workers, who are abusing drugs and alcohol, carrying contagious diseases and getting involved in criminal activity (Karwacki and Antonowicz; Stenning “Where”; cf. Savage et al. for British society). In this article I will argue that by creating a distinction between those who have adapted and those who haven’t, adaptation discourse prevents an awareness of structural inequalities and presents the marginalization of workers in purely individualistic terms.

Global Changes and Post-communist Transition

Before I begin my analysis, it is necessary to briefly mention the economic changes that led to the creation of post-communist adaptation discourse. The decline of industrial work (Sennett; Bauman Individualized) has changed the nature of employment leading to the processes of individualization in late capitalist societies (Bauman Individualized; Beck). At the same time, the declining size of the manual working class and the end of mass production meant a replacement of lifetime employment by more dynamic individual career-planning.

In his research on individuals in the late twentieth-century labor market, Arthur suggests that employees are now more in charge of their own careers, which makes them more flexible, more entrepreneurial, and more empowered. Other social scientists are less optimistic about the consequences of individualization. For example, Castel, and Bauman (Individualized, Postmodernity) note that, despite offering more individual freedom, the late twentieth century has also been characterized by a more unstable and unpredictable economic system which has led to uncertainty and stress for many workers. Bauman (Postmodernity 141) asks: “How can one aspire for a job for life, to a job as a life’s calling, if qualifications received through so much effort, every day turn from actives into passives?” He suggests that individuals who are best adapted are not those who invest in stability, but those who are flexible and see instability as a normal condition of their existence. Each individual is trying to “adapt” to this constantly changing society, but only a few are able to see a local order in a global chaos (Individualized). Such changes are seen by Castel as a result of the incapacity of nation states to guarantee employment and to assure redistribution of wealth, which causes intra-class rivalry and differentiation between workers who are able to take advantage of demand for their manual skills, and the “underprivileged” within the working class, whose skills are increasingly redundant (Savage et al. 99).

Transition from a planned to market economy meant similar changes for post-communist societies, but at a much faster pace. De-industrialization, individualization, widening inequalities, and appearance of new economic spaces and activities took place over the course of only a few years (Stenning “Where”).
Economic downturn led to millions of job losses in the former socialist bloc, mainly in the state industrial sector (Kideckel; Milanovic). New economic activities such as trade and business gained symbolic power, whereas manual labor lost it (Stenning "Where"). Kideckel claims that although unfavorable images of labor are not unique to Eastern Europe, "the specific circumstances in which socialism has been replaced by neo-capitalism have certainly intensified the differentiation of workers from other class groups and also the alienation of workers from each other" (120).

**Individualization and the "End of Class"**

Both western and post-communist societies are often characterized in terms of the individualization of life and work, personal responsibility for success and failings and a focus on possession of valuable skills and abilities that would allow one to be flexible and to adapt successfully to an unpredictable economy. Beck argues that such processes of individualization in modern societies will lead to the end of class identities and that it will become more difficult to use class categories in social research, since they can only be developed "on an objective income basis, or on structures of work and employment" (87). He claims that "people have been removed from class commitments and have to refer to themselves in planning their individual labour market biographies:"

Surges of individualization do compete with the experiences of a collective fate (mass unemployment and deskilling); however... class biographies, which are somehow ascribed, become transformed into reflexive biographies, which depend on the decisions of the actor. (88)

Although the use of the term "class" is quite ambiguous in this context, I find the distinction between "middle classes" and "working classes" useful for the purpose of my analysis. Nevertheless, this distinction needs to be clarified. "Occupation approaches" to class analysis are the most common, but Crompton notes several difficulties with such approaches: she views them as reductive and unable to account for the dynamic nature of class formation, she feels they overlook the cultural and identity differences between classes, and that they become more problematic in conditions of de-industrialization. Therefore, instead of relying solely on definition of class by occupation, I will refer to Bourdieu’s ("Forms") class analysis with a focus on the unequal access that "working" and "middle" classes have to different forms of capital (economic, cultural, social, and symbolic). Positions in the economy still remain at the heart of class distinctions (thus, in post-communist societies there is a great discrepancy between white-collar and blue-collar work as well as between work in the state or in the private sector), but cultural differences play an increasingly important role in the reproduction of old and the creation of new inequalities (Ball). Therefore, class is no longer a simple indicator of economic
position in the labor market, but “is being configured in terms of culture and identity, and ‘damaged’ or ‘faulty’ identities are conferred on working-class people by middle-class observers” (Lawler 804).

Post-communist adaptation discourse follows the above-mentioned processes of individualization and the “end of class”-argument, suggesting that class can no longer be viewed simply as an economic or occupational category that determines life chances, but that other factors, such as “adaptation potential” play an important role (Zlobina). What it fails to notice, however, is that “adaptation potential” in itself is a form of cultural capital that is unevenly distributed among different classes, becoming the source of class distinctions. Adaptation potential is an indicator of the “right” kind of culture, of “right” attitudes towards post-communist transition. The new middle classes are praised for “adapting,” whereas the old working classes are blamed for “not adapting.”

In post-communist societies class analysis has virtually disappeared from social sciences in conditions where inequalities have become wider and class is becoming an ever-stronger determinant of one’s life chances (Stenning “Where”). A common argument against class analysis is that not all workers “lost out” in transition and that not everyone was better off under communism. Some welcomed the changes and saw in them an opportunity for self-fulfillment in a more competitive environment. Highly qualified workers often set up their own private firms, “selling” their skills; others became entrepreneurs, or found new jobs in the private service sector (Symonchuk). Certain branches of the economy did not experience such a rapid economic decline as others, and workers kept their jobs and the social security attached to them. However, such an internal differentiation went in line with marginalization of the post-communist workers as a class. The fact that many workers did achieve a higher socio-economic status becomes yet another illustration for the post-communist adaptation discourse. Representatives of the new middle classes speak of their lives as examples of successful adaptation to new social realities (Symonchuk; Zlobina). Symonchuk (23), in her sociological analysis of “new middle classes” in post-communist Ukraine, herself adopts “adaptation discourse” by introducing her study with the following words:

Now people of a special psychological type are needed. In order not to lose one’s social positions and to stay in the middle class, one needs to cultivate certain personal qualities—ability to adapt quickly to permanently changing social and professional conditions. An example of success comes from people who are dynamic, who are ready to change jobs or even radically change professions, to be creative...

Lawler rightly points out that in statements like this, “social inequality is magically transformed into individual pathology and the problem of a classed society becomes the ‘problem’ of working-class people” (800). Following Lawler’s argument, one may say that adaptation discourse in post-communist societies presents working classes, as those who ought to adapt, who could adapt, but who don’t adapt. However, several difficulties arise if one follows the
set of assumptions that operate within this discursive field. First of all, "ought to adapt" means that adaptation to conditions of the market economy is not only desirable but also imperative, and those who don’t adapt are to be blamed for having the “wrong attitude.” Second of all, "could adapt" means that adaptation is only a matter of individual effort and fails to consider any possible structural barriers to successful adaptation. And, finally, “don’t adapt” suggests that working classes either do not have adaptation potential or do not use it properly, failing to recognize various adaptation strategies of working classes in their everyday survival (Stenning “Re-placing”).

Therefore, there are three arguments I want make in order to criticize post-communist adaptation discourse. First of all, it presents “success” and “failure” in purely individualistic terms, as if structural factors were of no importance. Second of all, this discourse becomes a tool in the hands of the post-communist elites in creating class distinctions, where working classes are portrayed as lacking adaptation potential, and as deviant cases from a normative middle-class ideal type. And finally, adaptation discourse is not a neutral sociological explanation of post-communist inequalities, but an ideological explanation created to ensure the success of transition to capitalism. The following sections will deal with these criticisms.

Individualization in Conditions of Structural Inequalities

My first criticism is that while class is becoming a stronger determinant of life chances in post-communist societies, the dominant classes make every effort to present the problem in an individualized form, as the “fault” of the victims themselves. Bauman (Individualized 106) offers an insightful account of this tendency:

Being an individual de jure, means having no one to blame for one’s own misery, seeking causes of one’s own defeats nowhere except in one’s own indolence and sloth, and looking for no remedies other than trying harder and harder still….With eyes focused on one’s own performance and thus diverted from the social space where the contradictions of individual existence are collectively produced, men and women are naturally tempted to reduce the complexity of their predicament.

Adaptation discourse draws heavily on western ideas of individualized society and more broadly on liberal humanist discourse. The latter emerged during the rise of modernity and one of its epistemological underpinnings is the idea of “sovereign individuality” (Foucault). However, the French revolutionary ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity were not fulfilled in western capitalist societies where class, gender, and race inequalities remained. Despite its use of more progressive rhetoric, “the individual in this [liberal] standpoint is incapable of seeing the persistence of exploitative relations” (Farough 246). When analyzing French post-colonial discourse, Barthes argued that the “the good
citizen/subject” was “inoculated” from unpleasant realities of persisting racism, and his/her position “appears open-minded while still being complicit in reproducing the structures of racial inequality” (qtd. in Farough 246). Similarly, it is much easier for upper and middle classes to see themselves “as if” untouched by social structure (Fine and Weis 78) and to assume that everyone else must be “untouched” as well. According to Skeggs (Class 48), mobility and access to different forms of capital that exist for a privileged few, are seen by them as applicable to many others.

Post-communist societies experienced a growth in inequalities, and an individual’s position at the beginning of transition was a significant determinant of where that person was likely to end up. Older people, those living in smaller towns and villages, those with lower levels of education and workers in industrial areas with no other employment opportunities available, were all more likely to end up as “lower classes” (Lane). Kideckel (116) suggests that post-communist transitions created “durable inequalities for the region’s workers” and that their identities “are shaped by their rapidly diminishing access to resources—material, social and symbolic—in neo-capitalist society.”

At the same time, apart from remaining blind to existing class inequalities, adaptation discourse contributes to the creation of new class inequalities based on merit and ability, where those who are “flexible,” who have “skills of high demand,” and who “adapt constantly” come on top. Bourdieu (Acts) suggested that such an attempt to transcend class by appealing to ability and intelligence is the major strength of the neo-liberal ideology, and he was committed to showing the contradictions of this ideology. For example, he argued that intelligence is seen by neo-liberals “as a gift from Heaven, whereas we know that in reality it is distributed by society and that inequalities in intelligence are social inequalities” (42). In line with Bourdieu’s argumentation, I suggest that “adaptation potential” is not a “gift from Heaven” but a form of symbolic capital, that is unevenly distributed among representatives of different social groups in post-communist societies, allowing only a few to achieve middle- and upper-class positions.

Creation of Class Distinctions Based on “Adaptation Potential”

This leads me to my second criticism: adaptation to new social realities is used to distinguish between upper and middle classes who adapt, and working classes who “fail to adapt.” Such discourse contributes to the symbolic production of class, “providing systems of interpretation of how we come to know and understand class” (Skeggs “Re-branding” 46). Post-communist workers find it all the more difficult to refer to a positive collective class identity they had under socialism and to express their class interests through political activism (Ost). Kideckel shows a good example of how post-communist working classes are marginalized and blamed for blocking the transition to a market economy “due to the bad habits they learned [during the communist time] which included
a questionable work ethic with a resulting lack of productivity, generalized dishonesty, and the expectation of getting something for nothing” (114).

The economic transition to capitalism required a change in ideological principles. Therefore, the marginalization of the working classes occurred not only in the changing structure of the labor market (an example could be an increase of jobs in the service sector and a decline of industrial manual labor), but also in social representations of post-socialist working classes. Working-class communities both in western and more and more so in post-communist countries, are often portrayed in the media as "ghettos of the workless and the hopeless” (Reay and Lucey 411), as grey depressing places, and workers themselves—as an anonymous mass (Stenning "Where”; Sennett and Cobb). Therefore, post-communist working classes suffer not only from their marginal economic position, but also from misrecognition, which, according to Fraser "constitutes a form of institutionalized subordination—and thus, a serious violation of justice” (26).

What is often missing from the accounts of the "culture of poverty" is an awareness of this "institutionalized subordination" of the working classes in hierarchically stratified post-communist societies. As Stenning ("Where” 989) argues: "there is a fine line between accounts of structural processes that marginalize working-class communities and discourses which see the source of exclusion in the activities (or more likely passivities) of the communities themselves.” An in-depth analysis of structural processes that marginalize post-socialist workers goes beyond the scope of this article. However, the adaptation discourse that I have focused on is a good example of how social-structural dimensions of class inequality become interpreted as being “embedded only in the subjectivities of social actors” (Lawler 798).

Capitalist Economy as Normative and Requiring Adaptation

The final argument I want to make in response to the post-communist adaptation discourse is that the need to adapt to new socio-economic realities is presented as self-evident, and that there is a lack of alternatives to market transitions. Social inequalities are removed from the economic sphere and placed into the cultural field. The market economy is seen as normative and as requiring everyone’s adaptation. Post-communist societies are said to be experiencing "global pressures": de-industrialization, unemployment, and state de-regulation are seen as inevitable, but in the end everyone will adapt and become more empowered, more in control of one’s own life, and more independent of the state:

There is a whole game with the connotations and associations of words like flexibility, souplesse, deregulation, which tends to imply that the neo-liberal message is a universalist message of liberation. (Bourdieu Acts 31)
Žižek argues that whereas several decades ago there was still a discussion around different possibilities for the development of society and attempts by different social groups to intervene in defense of their collective interests, now the capitalist economy is presented as “objective reality” that requires everyone’s adaptation to it. Ost shows a similar tendency in Poland. He claims that Polish workers “were removed from the revolution they had made and condemned to be the losers of economic reform” and are currently unable to articulate their economic anger in terms of their class interests (122).

Adaptation discourse argues for the changing of individuals to accommodate the needs of the market economy rather than vice versa. Post-communist working classes have to adapt to new socio-economic realities, even if this, according to Kideckel, means that they will become even more exploited in the shadow economies with increased insecurity and “flexibility,” where modest advantages of guaranteed state employment and social benefits are lost. Bourdieu puts it concisely:

it is in the name of this model that flexible working, another magic word of neo-liberalism, is imposed, meaning night work, weekend work, irregular working hours…It sets up the norm of all practices, and therefore as ideal rules, the real regularities of the economic world abandoned to its own logic, the so-called law of the market. (Acts 34-35)

Bourdieu argues for the need to break with the faith in historical inevitability and to take note of economic necessities, but “in order to fight them and, where possible, to neutralize them” (26).

Conclusion

In this article I have argued that post-communist adaptation discourse is a discursive structure that creates, inscribes, and reproduces social inequalities. It draws heavily on western discourse around the individualization of work and career, personal responsibility for success and failings, and “the end of class.” Adaptation discourse misrepresents post-communist workers by suggesting that their marginal socio-economic positions are due to their lack of adaptation potential. However, as Savage (159) argues, “if there is still a role for class analysis, it is to continue to emphasize the brute realities of social inequality and the extent to which these are constantly effaced by a middle class, individualized culture, that fails to register the social implications of its routine actions.” In this article I have shown the negative implications of the adaptation discourse as marginalizing post-communist working classes, and as uncritically legitimizing the system of class inequalities during the transition to a market economy.
References


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