

THE SUBCULTURAL APPROACH TO THE PROCESSES OF TRANSITION TO DEMOCRACY

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10975305>**Abstract**

The purpose of this article is to present the application of the subcultural approach as an alternative and an opportunity to build a new theoretical base on the basis of which to explain the process of social change. The presentation is based on specific studies of the processes of transition from totalitarianism to democracy in Bulgaria.

Keywords: transition, subculture, cultureme, ideologeme

Various influential social theories proved to be powerless to explain adequately the turbulent social processes - so-called 'processes of transition' in Central and Eastern Europe which began at the end of the 20th century and which have passed under the sign of democratization. At the same time, a fairly extensive literature on the Transition has been accumulated and a significant part of it is based on in-depth historical research. However, even the most detailed and objective historiographical description of the facts cannot fully recreate the living process and is not enough to achieve the essence (understanding) of the observed processes. Understanding is still impossible without the presence of some system (a theory of social development) that explains the interrelationships between events, brings to the fore the more significant of them, and provides a methodology for the predictability of processes. Regardless of the avoidance of the existence of such "systematicity" by individual researchers (probably in order not to be accused of ideological bias), the fact remains that the systemic approach is implicitly present and often evident even from the terminology used. The use of the term 'revolution' in the characterization of the historical events in 1990-1991 by D. Ludzhev [16] and respectively 'turnabout' by I. Baeva and Ev. Kalinova [14]. But the avoidance of the meta-theory of social development in historical research, especially when it covers periods of profound social transformation of large masses of people, does not contribute to the quality of the research.

The main reason for this is the failure of the theoretical base, which not only does not offer a 'practically applicable' methodology, but also pushes a whole class of phenomena of decisive importance for the development of social processes to the periphery of historical research. Specifically, here, we are referring to the development of structures in which the public mentality is formed and based on which the structures become active subjects of the historical process. These are the subcultures. Another reason for the 'pushing to the periphery' is that the literature on the issue of subcultures accumulated since the end of the last century (Tepavicharov [21] Pastarmadzjieva [18], Barova [2]) does not offer an approach that would enable a clear qualitative

and, above all, quantitative characterization of the studied social phenomena in a way that they can be treated as 'hard' historical facts. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to put the subcultures in the focus of the study of the Transition in Bulgaria, bringing to the fore the 'weight' of the presence of their cultureme in the public consciousness with the relevant quantitative and qualitative methods.

The fundamental obstacle to studying subcultures and the sociocultural mechanisms manifested through them is the insufficient adequacy of the leading macro-theories in explaining social change. For Marxism, social change is simply consequence and reflection of processes in the 'base'; they are determined by the respective economic relations and this makes them an absolutely non-autonomous transmission mechanism, as the main engine of the historical process is the development of the productive forces, which is very problematic when trying to explain the real historical process, especially in the last century.

The idea of the continuity of historical development from lower to higher forms is a millennial tradition that dates back to Antiquity (Titus Lucretius Carus, *On the Nature of Things*), passes through the Middle Ages with its history 'periodization' (the four earthly kingdoms aimed at the fifth – of God), and achieves its flourishing in European philosophy of the 18th-19th c., a tradition that views human history as a progressive development from lower to higher forms. This teleologism, which in the Middle Ages existed on the only possible basis at the time – theology, and later was placed by Marxism on materialism, is in fact both the main cornerstone and major stumbling block of the formational approach. Indeed, humanity is undergoing an ever-accelerating technological development which impacts society. Nevertheless, or at least so far, the basic structure of society has been virtually unchanged since the emergence of the first civilizations. The change dynamics in political regimes are obvious, but they are not directly related to changes in the main production factors, nor are they directly influenced by technological development or economic prosperity in general.

On the basis of teleology, there is built the so-called 'transitology', which while exploiting the ideas of the inevitable and upward development and successive 'waves of democratization' Huntington [13], tries not only to justify the transition to democracy, but also to operationalize this process with specific prescriptions for action. However, the historical events of the second half of the 20th century refuted the 'inevitability' of the movement towards democracy. At the same time, another weakness of transitology becomes evident – the focus on elites as an engine of social processes. This has led to one-sided patterns of transition and a discrepancy with reality.

An indication of the difficulties with transitology is its abandonment in 1996 by Huntington and his consequent attempt to analyse and predict historical processes through a new reading of the civilizational approach – Huntington [12]. The latter, which has its classical authors in Toynbee [23] and Sorokin [19], is the other major trend in attempts to build a metatheory of the development of human society. However, even if we assume that civilizations develop in cycles passing through the stages of 'ideational', 'sensate' and 'idealistic' cultural mentality, the category 'grid' of this development is so large that such 'trifles' as transitions from one political regime to another just can't be detected. Huntington tries to address this shortcoming by predicting the clash of civilizations and placing it at the heart of the dynamics of historical processes, at least in the coming decades.

Another of the more significant theories purporting to explain processes on a global scale is the World-Systems approach. Immanuel Wallerstein [24] is perhaps the most popular of the founders of this approach. It examines the global, and to a large extent national, historical process, as a result of the relationship between three hierarchical planes, grouping the individual countries mostly by their economic level – core, semi-periphery, and periphery. The World-Systems approach has been repeatedly criticized for its economic one-sidedness and neglect of social, spiritual, political and other factors in explaining the processes.

Until recently, it was quite popular to use the 'network approach', which is rooted in the works of Simmel and Durkheim, but underwent strong development after the mid-20th c., including through the application of graph theory. In Bulgaria, it received its application (Bundzhulov [7]) based on Bourdieu's Forms of Capital [5] and Choses Dites [6] notion of the different forms of capital – political, cultural, and symbolic. The strength of this approach is that it makes it possible to largely avoid favouring some factors (most often economic) at the expense of others (political, social, cultural, etc.) in explaining the transformation processes. It illustrates well the dynamics of social groups, down to the individual level. However, what remains outside the analysis and is practically not discussed even in the most serious study of the transition in Bulgaria carried out within this approach (Chalakov [8]), is where the impetus for the rapid transformation of capital, actors and the networks themselves started in the late 1980s.

In addition to the above variety of theories, the Bulgarian theoretical thought largely takes the view of

the practically complete dominance of the exogenous model of the country's development. It follows Blagoev's theoretical proclamation that what happens in Bulgaria 'depends three quarters on the external and one quarter on the internal' factors []. This framework, which resonates with the Bulgarian folk psychology, is developed in an updated version under the methodological guise of a concept of a world system in which Bulgaria plays the most peripheral role in the European capitalis. Even if we accepted this premise as truth, it would not automatically direct the political and economic processes in the country.

All these fundamental theoretical considerations, despite being at first glance perceived as detached from the current social processes, have their reflection and 'notation' in real political action. An example of such notation is the idea of the transition being right-wing by default and therefore inevitably socially unjust. This idea finds its 'theoretical' justification in the inadequacy of the existing theory, which allows the substitution of notions and concepts for the sake of convenience of political goals. Practically, the result is an 'ideologically justified' abandonment of social policy during the transition, including by the self-proclaimed 'left' political structures. This mystification of the social processes cannot be overcome if the foundation of the theoretical basis is not completely and structurally revised to reveal the real mechanisms of social change whose sociocultural genesis takes place within the subcultures which are in complex interactions with each other and with the mainstream culture.

The conclusion drawn from the review of the main theories offering an interpretation of the social, economic and political processes of transformation that began in the late 1990s in Eastern Europe is that a comprehensive and complete elucidation of these processes is impossible without a new comprehensive macro theory of historical development. It must overcome the stated methodological shortcomings of the previous ones (teleology, the one-sided one-factor approach, scope insufficiency, etc.), by not merely reworking the old approaches, but by proposing a completely new construct in their place. In this sense our main research hypothesis is that social change follows the accumulations of changes in the mass consciousness, which in due course bring about changes in social relations. In (relatively) stable social environments, the changes occur gradually or diffusely, permeating society's fabric almost imperceptibly and without major conflicts. By contrast, when changes occur in a short time and especially when accompanied by rising social tension, then the changing social attitudes are formed and grouped around different, often antagonistic, cores. The latter form the nuclei around which social groups may form and subcultures may emerge.

Conceptual and content analysis of subcultures has been done by a number of authors such as Yinger [25] and Almond and Verba [1]. In Bulgaria, a number of authors take a stand on the issue: Blaga Blagoeva [4], Plamen Georgiev [11], Todor Tanev [20], Antoniy Todorov [22] and others, and many of them offer heuristic analyses and definitions. However, the attempt to give a summary of subcultural studies is marked by the

high degree of fragmentation of the theoretical field, demonstrated by the vagueness of the conceptual apparatus and the practical lack of a single conceptual focus to unite the individual, often heuristic, views of the authors. One of the reasons for this is rooted in the isolated consideration of subcultures and their confinement to one sphere of society or as closed social groups. Another reason is the dominant conscious or unconscious consideration of subcultures mainly as an object, consequence and reflection of certain processes and influences, a view which pushes to the background their main role in forming and influencing action, ie. being an agent of change. This limiting approach, albeit producing certain results in periods of social stability, becomes very restrictive and lacking while studying turbulent social transformations

In this context, it could be said that at the end of the so-called 'Real Socialism' period in Bulgaria (around mid-1980s) and at the beginning of the transition in the political, economic and cultural life in 1989, several important subcultures were formed which, in varying degrees, influenced the overall development of the country. The main mechanism of this influence, which turns subcultures into agents of, or active participants in, the historical process are the culturemes – cultural narratives employed by the mass consciousness to express attitudes towards the reality and to form, justify and initiate social action. These narratives are also the main mechanism by which the subcultures manifest themselves as participants/agents in the historical processes.

The research aimed at studying in depth and validating the culturemes as key identifiers of each subculture. Upon the successful completion, the research would have provided the necessary tools for the study of sociocultural transformations as well as for the overall development of scholarly theory. The research took an interdisciplinary approach, combining the perspectives and methodological tools of different scientific disciplines (culturology, cultural heritage sciences, cultural anthropology, political science and philosophy of history).

For the purposes of the study, we used the following terms and definitions. *Focus* is the part of the basic cultural spectre which acts as a focal point for a given subculture – in other words, this is the combination of drivers and goals. *Nucleus* refers to those members who wholly adopt the values and practices of the subcultures and fully identify themselves with it. The exact size of the nucleus may vary between subcultures. *Culturemes* are the narratives used in the mass consciousness for expressing attitudes towards reality and to form, initiate and justify social action. They are the main mechanism by which subcultures participate in the social processes. *Ideologemes* are political culturemes. The term 'transition' is widely used in political and social science to denote the changes in Central and Eastern European countries after the fall of the communist regimes in 1989. In the case of Bulgaria, we use the term *totalitarian state*, rather than *communist*, as it better denotes the nature of the regime and specifically the degree of state control over three main areas of society.

In Bulgaria, the transition from totalitarian society to a society with a market economy, a multiparty political system and a number of other institutions guaranteeing the basic requirements of present-day democracies, is still considered a complex, layered and controversial process. Therefore, one of the goals of the research was to uncover the internal sociocultural mechanisms of the transition. These mechanisms are of critical importance because regardless of whether one adheres to the exogenous approach or one defends the overall importance of the internal factors in explaining the cause and course of the Bulgarian transition, the historical process could not take place without mechanisms through which public attitudes are formed and directed; attitudes which in turn are the basis for the behaviour of the multitudes of individuals.

The arguments in favour of the subcultural approach, in addition to its purely theoretical justification, also requires evidence of its applicability in the practice of socio-historical research. This requires at least three successive research efforts: identification, verification, and pragmatization (demonstrating applicability) of subcultures. One such round of activities was carried out, as in the first step (identification), from the initially identified about a dozen potential subcultures, after conducting qualitative studies (Nazarska [17], Debruyne [9], Debruyne [10]) and their analysis, they were reduced to six manifesting themselves in the three main societal spheres – politics, economy and culture. We named them Real Socialism and Anti-Communism; Wrestlers/Mutri and Honest Entrepreneurs; and Environmentalists and Chalga.

The verification (the second stage) was carried out by means of a quantitative study (Karakachanov [15]), while a nationally representative survey is also pending. However, all these efforts would be just an intellectual exercise if the connection between the presence of the targeted subcultures and the actual historical process were not demonstrated. This connection is most clearly visible in the political subcultures, which are the bearers of the "political mentality" underlying the characteristic bipolar political model during the greater part of the Bulgarian Transition. It was precisely this mentality and the model built on it that determined the course and character of the Transition and set the framework for the political decisions made, beyond which it was impossible for political leaders, even at the cost of their careers. However, the influence "mentality - model - historical process" is a matter of a separate study.

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