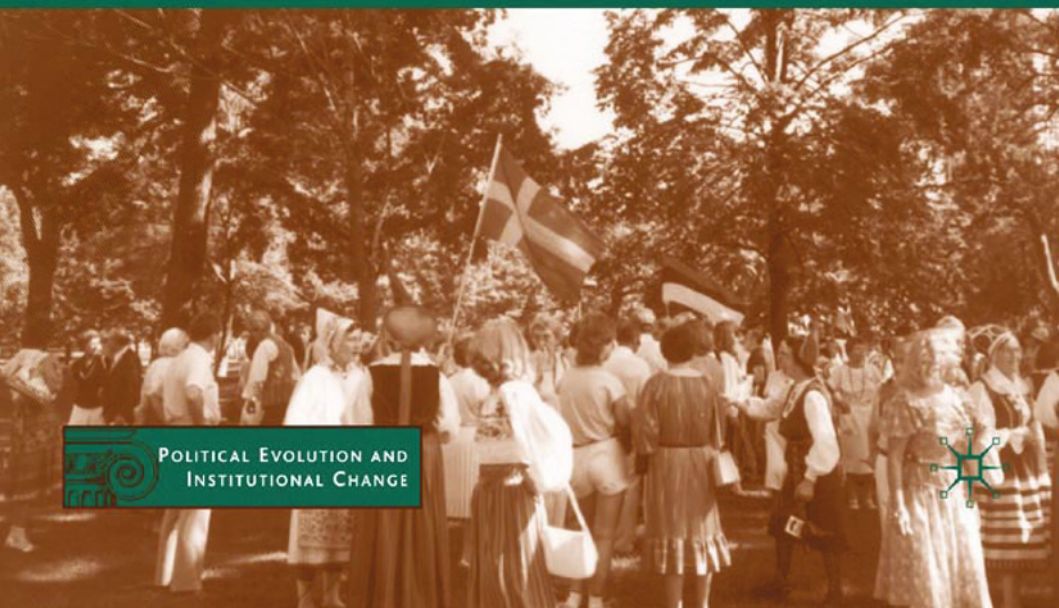
Political Culture under Institutional Pressure

How Institutional Change Transforms Early Socialization

Li Bennich-Björkman



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To my Swedish and Estonian Family

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CONTENTS

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TABLES AND FIGURES

Tables

Figures

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In September 1944 my mother and her sister fled a war-torn Estonia. While my mother stayed in Sweden, her sister Erika continued to Toronto, Canada and became part of a large Estonian community there. Two sisters remained in the occupied Estonia. Even though contacts between the four grew over the decades as the Soviet power opened up, they lived profoundly different lives, spread as they were over the world and on opposite sides of the Iron Curtain. After Estonia regained its independence in 1991, my own contacts with the country, the culture, and our family there intensified. I noticed that despite living far apart culturally, I still could easily recognize my mother's mentality and values in the thoughts and behavior of her sisters. Values described as essentially Estonian united them, such as a very high consideration for individual achievements and education, a strong repudiation of Communism, a quite developed conservatism when it came to table manners and social codes—and the Estonian fixation with good looks! In other words, they were strangely familiar. Not in everything, though. I remember times of fierce discussions at the dinner table in the semidetached house in Toronto when my mother stubbornly defended the Swedish welfare state and egalitarianism against angry Canadian-Estonians who did not want to hear of the Swedish "socialist" experiment where nobody had to work! In Tallinn, my mother's choice to wear trousers at times became a constant source of sorrow to her even more socially correct sisters. Were not there any proper clothes in Sweden? The idea behind this book was thus partly born out of a curiosity to learn more about how the mentalities and values of my closest relatives had been shaped by being forced to adapt to new and unfamiliar institutional conditions as grown-ups. Did their common upbringing determine any

of the values that they now shared? Fortunately, how existing institutional contexts affect us individually and how much we are conditioned by cultural patterns socialized in the early years of the life span proved also to be one of the core questions of political culture studies. But for very many who share a history of being uprooted from a familiar context as refugees, labor migrants, by war or by having to suffer occupation it is indeed not only a question of theoretical interest but a real-world problem.

This book had not been possible to write without the contribution by the Estonian interwar generation itself. In Canada, Estonia, and in Sweden, several hundred persons have generously given of their time and their thoughts, opening up and sometimes sharing painful memories as questions have generated reflections on life trajectories that have not always been straightforward and simple. Having the privilege of getting insights into how the fate of this generation can contribute to our understanding of classic questions in political science problems has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my professional life. My three wonderful research assistants, Annika Tamra, Sofie Holmström, and Dr. Per Adman (who has written the appendix) deserve particular gratitude for their commitment and hard work. All of them made this work so much more stimulating. Mrs. Leida Marley in Toronto was a key person and contributed tremendously in helping to gain the confidence of the initially reluctant group of first-generation Canadian-Estonians. Through the *Eesti Maja* (Estonian House) in Stockholm I came in contact with Mai Raudpähn, to whom I am sincerely grateful for help with identifying the Swedish-Estonian respondents.

This book owes also many debts to colleagues both in Sweden and outside. Some colleagues have been particularly important. Bo Rothstein, Aili Aarelaid-Tart, Raivo Vetik, Rein Ruutsoo, Harald Runblom, David J. Smith, Per Adman, Katarina Barrling Hermansson, Cecilia Garme, Thorleif Pettersson, Björn Wittrock, and Hans Blomkvist are all among those. I have presented earlier and more comprised versions of the text at research seminars at my home department, Department of Government, Uppsala, at the Old Forum Seminar, Uppsala, the seminar of the Swedish Collegium for the Advanced Study of Social Sciences (SCASSS), Institute for Baltic Studies, Stockholm, Department of Political Science, Gothenburg, Department of Political Science, Tartu, and at conferences such as the Baltic Studies Conference and the yearly conference of Swedish Political Science Association. Anonymous reviewers have contributed to substantial improvements, for which I am truly grateful. I also want to extend thanks to the Senior Editor at

Palgrave Macmillan, Anthony Wahl, who made substantial efforts on my behalf. Articles based on the material presented more extensively here have appeared earlier in *Journal of Baltic Studies* 1: 2006 and *Nationalities Papers,* March 2007. I gratefully acknowledge permission rights from the publishers.

A fall semester at SCASSS in 1999 provided me with enough solitude and intellectual company to begin the admittedly long process of thinking about the book. The Swedish Research Council (VR; formerly Swedish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences) generously funded my research and has behaved ideally from the perspective of respecting the necessary academic freedom in not interfering in the intellectual process or demanding monthly reports on every step.

The most important persons, my family, must be mentioned. Karsten, the most helpful man you can think of and also my husband, has devoted endless hours to all kinds of support, technical and emotional not least. My beloved children Anna and Oscar forever changed my life and made everything, including intellectual work, so much more worthwhile. Strong-willed and intellectually vital as ever, my parents Laine and Bo, continue to inspire me with their constant interest in everything I do. Such love and affection is a true privilege.

CHAPTER ONE

Socialized Culture and Institutional Change: Introducing the Discussion

The Question

To what extent do existing institutions particularly determine the political culture of a society, and to what extent does culture exist independently? In this book I return to the question that has been a concern of political science ever since Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba published their classic study on civic culture in 1963.[1] What happens to socialized worldviews when these views fall under the long-term influence of political and social institutions that are different from the ones that played a role during a person's early, formative years? Do the original orientations change? Or do they endure, despite what the new institutional setting seems to "demand"? There are few scholars today who deny the process of mutual influence and feedback between how institutions are constructed and values and perceptions people hold in respect to politics. But just how long is needed for institutional impact to begin to show itself on the individual cultural level? While some speak about generations, others claim that single individuals are themselves open to change within their life spans. How institutions and culture actually interact, and what this interplay implies for cultural change are major theoretical questions for political science and the social sciences, but are also questions in need of further empirical investigation.[2] These questions focus on the mechanisms that link state and society, on institutions at the macro level, and on value systems and behavior at the micro level. Why should the question of cultural adaptation and tenacity be of such crucial importance? From a political,

macro-level point of view, the question of socialization and the individual's potential for resocialization have far-reaching implications for the understanding of the processes of social continuity and change. Since culture, understood as values and convictions, partly causes action, the extent to which adaptation takes place conditions the speed and the depth of social transformation, as Mannheim noted in 1952, when he wrote that "the problem of generations is important enough to merit serious consideration. It is one of the indispensable guides to an understanding of the structure of social and intellectual movements."[3]

How, then, can we actually investigate the dynamic phenomenon of this interaction empirically? The fact that institutions—as may have been the case for the "civic culture" of Britain and the United States—tend in the long run to be reflected in public attitudes (in the sense that new institutional "input" gradually replaces earlier institutional influences) does not tell us much about the independent or dependent nature of culture. For this purpose, dynamic situations in which there ideally are "before" and "after" scenarios of institutional change must be examined rather than a state of equilibrium.[4]

Where do we find a group of people who have been through a shared process of early socialization yet ended up in institutional settings quite different from their years of childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood? My empirical case in this book involves the quite small Estonian community that grew up under the historically formative years in the 1920s and 1930s. Since 1944 this community has lived either in exile in Canada and Sweden, or remained in the occupied Estonia until its liberation in 1991. I use this interwar generation of Estonians who grew up during the creation of the first independent Estonian state and then almost literally has spread all over the world to shed further light on the political science seminal topic outlined earlier.

However, and this needs to be stressed, even though the Estonians, their cultural background, and their life conditions will necessarily occupy space and be of concern here, it should be pointed out that the book should not be read as specifically about Estonia or a particular Estonian generation. Discovering how socialized political culture and institutions interact is the topic of general interest here and this particular generation constitutes an unusually promising case by which to examine this problem. There is often a need to construct something that resembles a social science laboratory in order to investigate questions of this type, for example, by using structured, focused case studies. But there are also already existing opportunities that should not be missed. They are not numerous, but they are there. It is such an opportunity

that the Estonian interwar generation represents here. However, by trying to answer the question of the relation between culture and institutions, the study also creates a particular narrative of European history from the perspective of a small and dispersed nation. In a sense it is a story of how parts of "Europe" continued to exist elsewhere after World War II.

The individuals in focus here more or less involuntarily separated at a specific historic time, in 1944, when the Soviet Red Army once again occupied Estonian territory leading to mass flight to the West. For many decades they have also been living in societies characterized by often radically different institutions from those of their youth, many of them for over fifty years. That makes this group something of a critical case for the culturalist claims that early experiences endure. If traces of the once socialized political culture in the first Estonian republic are detectable or proved to play a role in one form or another after all this time, then we should most certainly acknowledge their importance.

Resocialization, Tenacity, Integration, or Alienation

Let me now return to the general problem. There will be ample space for empirical considerations regarding the particular case in the second half of this introductory chapter. On the surface, the question of how culture and institutions interact may appear harmless, but it is really one of the major watersheds in the intellectual history of the social sciences, separating the culturalists on the one hand and the rationalists on the other. In political science, the two theories of culturalism and rationalism have often been treated as opposites, although presently, for various reasons, the common ground between them seems to be expanding, giving birth to hybrid theories such as institutionalism or neo-institutionalism.

The many different versions of culturalism all depart from the assumption that human action, thoughts, and desires can only be properly understood when the social contexts in which they arise are taken into consideration. Culturalism consequently assumes that values and preferences—why individuals want the things they want—are externally determined, and this creates a "natural" variation between cultures, or between the subcultures within a larger culture.

One of the culturalists' core assumptions—and it should be noted that the theory is defined here in accordance with the sociological

tradition of Parsons and Eckstein[5]—is the postulate of early formative socialization.[6] In the earlier literature on socialization, the concept of so-called socialization agents played a central role. Socialization agents have been understood as actively involved in the process of transmitting cultural values, either deliberately or nondeliberately. These have been identified as the family,[7] the school,[8] the peer group,[9] media and popular culture,[10] and work-life.[11] All these are agents—individual or collective—or arenas where individuals interact with each other.

It is striking, however, that in some of the earlier works these socialization processes seem to be almost machine-like. Actors appear to be like empty vessels, and the processes of cultural transmission seem simplistic and devoid of complexities. For example, the direct or indirect messages transmitted by the agents of socialization are not in conflict, as they are in real life, and the way the cultural codes are engraved seems to proceed in an almost deterministic manner.

Ronald Inglehart—who like other culturalists assumes early socialization to be formative, and who presents modernization as being in itself a socialization force and thus a cause for cultural change—has done the most to dissipate the mechanistic impression of these socialization processes. In contrast to other theories of socialization, Inglehart believes that general societal conditions, particularly those of a material nature but also seminal political and social events, have a dominant influence on the formation of values and orientations of age cohorts.

Inglehart hence introduces an external motor of value change, thereby avoiding the recurrent rationalist critique that culturalists are unable to explain social value change. The general material affluence of the postwar period has encouraged those who grew up in the 1960s and 1970s to embrace values of a "post-materialist" kind, Inglehart claims. As a result, a decreasing focus on security and material welfare, and an increasing prioritizing of values of self-expression, life quality, happiness, and psychological well-being accompany the transition from an industrial to a postindustrial society. The shift toward an affluent knowledge economy generates a shift in value priorities, and in political preferences.

Thus, to follow Inglehart's lead here, we do not need to know the exact messages, direct or indirect, transmitted by actors such as parents, schools, or peers in order to predict the cultural contents or value priorities of a society or a community. It would be at least partially sufficient to establish the general material and social conditions that prevail when an age cohort matures into adulthood, to then reasonably accurately identify the predominant value structure of a certain period. This

is the point of departure in this study, in that I depict the general economic, political, and social conditions that prevailed in Estonia between the wars. These are also conditions within reach, given the position of posterity from which I approach this period.

Individuals develop their basic orientations and outlooks in a process of cumulative formation, where experiences from different spheres of life are brought together in attempts to form coherent perceptions of the world.[12] This implies, for example, that values and orientations regarding politics are not necessarily formed solely through the influence of political institutions, but are also acquired through other experiences. Although perhaps not strongly supported by empirical research, it has been suggested that the way authority relations[13] work in other spheres of life—in the family, in the classroom, in peer groups, and at work—creates in the individual a mental picture of how power and authority are exercised in general, and *should* be exercised. This impression then spills over into the political realm.

But, the culturalists state, an individual's basic worldview is formed by the cumulative impact of these processes up to a certain point in the early years of adulthood, when the process of socialization is assumed to come to a halt. In other words, crucial to this theory is the prediction that the period of childhood and adolescence play a predominant role in forming an individual's mental landscape, his orientations, and that these formative experiences—childhood socialization—creates effects that last a lifetime. It is interesting, by the way, to note how strongly influenced the culturalist family is by psychological theories and psychoanalytic ideas and thinking. Although a conception of human nature as ordered and able to adapt to various contexts and situations has taken root in social sciences such as economics, political science, and sociology, a strong belief in life as a constant and often hopeless struggle to escape the overshadowing influences from childhood and adolescence still seem to largely prevail in large segments of psychology, both in its academic and its popular form.

Consequently, the culturalists largely refute the idea that institutional changes such as revolutions, reforms, or other major transitions influence individuals, once socialized under different circumstances, into profoundly reorienting themselves. Although of course they do acknowledge that the possibility of mental change exists, they insist that this possibility is limited, especially when it comes to basic and deeply rooted mental attitudes. The roots of values and orientations are traced to the conditions that prevailed when the individuals were growing up. "The key question to ask about generational differences is not *how old*

are people now, but *when were they young*" Putnam claims, and hence captures one of culturalists' basic assumptions.[14] Another key culturalist assumption is that, on the whole, later experiences are incorporated into an already-existing mental framework in an attempt to maintain coherence and to avoid dissonance.

Culturalists from Emile Durkheim to Max Weber, Harry Eckstein, and Ronald Inglehart all assume individual cultural tenacity, building on a psychological line of research. The family of cultural theories—and the culturalist theory adhered to here is one influential variant—constitutes one theoretical attempt to understand social continuity and change. An alternative theoretical framework is that of rationalist theory, also referred to as the economic theory[15] or rational-choice institutionalism.[16]

When the well-known sociologist Jon Elster writes that "*homo economicus* " adapts to changing circumstances while "*homo sociologicus*" is insensitive to circumstances, adhering to the prescribed behavior even if new and apparently better options become available,[17] he fails to distinguish that it is the assumption of a predominance of "lagged" prescribed behavior that separates the culturalists and the rationalists. Both theories could, however, well incorporate into their framework the importance played by norms in general, which is demonstrated more and more frequently in the development of rational choice theory and rational choice institutionalism.[18]

But for a rationalist, an individual, or for that matter a collective like an organization, a bureaucracy, exists predominantly in the present while to a culturalist or a historical institutionalist, the past is always part of the present, although it varies to what extent that is true. Likewise, when Gabriel Almond points to the shift toward support for democracy in West German political culture from the 1950s to the 1970s, or the decline of political trust in the United States of America from the 1950s to the 1970s, as examples of the plasticity of political culture, he does not differentiate between generational change or change within generations.[19]

Rationalists such as Brian Barry, Barrington Moore, Ronald Rogowski, and Karl Marx thus claim that culture as primarily a reflection of existing social influences and the dominant institutional structure is not "frozen" but is highly malleable. They presume that a change of institutional systems also tends to produce cultural change, hereby denying belief systems any independent position. Advocates of the view of socialization as a lifelong process emphasize that changes in social, political, and economic structures also change incentive structures, which in turn make individuals redirect themselves mentally. Throughout life,