



PERSPECTIVES ON EUROPE

CONFERENCE FORUM

What makes a Society Successful?

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Following the fall of the communist regimes of Eastern Europe, many people expected life spans in these countries to increase as new freedoms and opportunities became available. Subsequently, male life expectancy in the Czech Republic increased to 72 years by 2001, but dropped to barely 59 years in Russia. That is a difference of thirteen years of life, on average, per man. You would not see that kind of discrepancy between two societies, even if one had a cure for cancer and the other did not. What do these findings mean? Do they reflect the difference between a successful and a less successful society? Does it even make sense to compare societies in terms of their relative success? Below I discuss the work of social scientists who came to be convinced that we should take this question seriously.

In 2003, the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research (CIFAR) invited a multidisciplinary group of researchers to work together on the question of what might constitute a successful society and how to study it. The results of our work together were published in the fall of 2009 in a collective volume titled, *Successful Societies: How Institutions and Culture Affect Health*,¹ which was the object of a plenary session at the last meeting of the Council for European Studies held in Montréal in last April. The group and our advisory committee includes several Europeanists (Marcos Ancelovici, Natalie Zemon Davis, Jane Jenson, Peter Hall, William Sewell, myself) as well as a number of comparativists and macro social scientists (Peter Evans, Peter Gourevitch, Will Kimlicka, and Biju Rao among others). Our collective insights could be of use to experts on Europe who often ponder the relative merits of the “Scandinavian model,” the “European welfare state,” “the American neo-liberal regime,” etc.

To consider societal success, think of the famous Indian parable of the six blind men and the elephant. Each man touches a different part of the pachyderm and makes prediction about what the animal as a whole looks like. One touches the tail and says it is like a rope. Another finds its front leg and thinks an elephant is like a tree. Only by putting all of their experiences together do they get at a complete description of an elephant. So it goes for our group.

Obviously, average lifespan is a suitable measure of societal success. But you can also measure success by how equitable a society is; or by how well it deals with an epidemic such as AIDS; or by how minority groups are treated by the majority. There are other equally valid measures. But our group started with health-related measures, as these appeared to be less culturally biased than other measures – almost everyone agrees that it is a good thing to have low infant mortality and high life expectancy.

Whereas epidemiologists write about how the wear and tear of everyday life, i.e., stress, gets under the skin to produce poor health outcomes for lower income populations, our group wanted to know how institutions and collective myths and ideals intervene to mediate this relationship. What do societies do to alleviate the wear and tear? How does shared hope generate collective

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resilience? How can institutions buffer individuals from the vagaries of the market? These are the types of questions that drove our collective inquiry. Each of us focused on one aspect of successful societies and how they may buffer individuals and help them face various challenges. Some considered the conditions producing more effective institutions, while others focused on less inter-group violence, more equal distribution of resources, and so forth.

Our multidimensional view draws on the work of the economist Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen to emphasize capabilities, as opposed to purely economic indexes. However, we defined capabilities more broadly to consider capability as much as recognition and cultural membership, social inclusion as much as democratic participation, cultural tolerance as much as economic growth. Social networks, social identity, social hierarchies, collective action, boundaries, and social capital are the analytical tools that our research group mobilized to analyze these various dimensions of successful societies.

We proposed that as the life challenges facing a person loom larger relative to his or her capabilities for coping with them, we expect the wear and tear of daily life to take a greater toll on that person's health, because s/he is likely to have more intense feelings of anger, anxiety, depression or stress. We explore how specific types of institutional and cultural structures condition people's capabilities. The perspective suggests not only that meaning-making and social resources can be as important as material resources to the balance between capabilities and life challenges, but also that social resources are not always as tightly coupled with economic inequality as some analyses imply.

In sub-Saharan Africa, governments are struggling to cope with an AIDS epidemic that is devastating the continent. But the governments usually seen as most effective are not necessarily the ones coping best with that epidemic. In Botswana, for instance, arguably the best governed of African states, the rate of HIV infection has climbed, despite intensive public health campaigns. By contrast, Uganda has had more corruption and less democratic governance, but is coping with the epidemic more successfully. How can these differences in the success of AIDS prevention strategies be explained? One of our group members, Ann Swidler at the University of California, Berkeley, has found the answer by examining how governments have been able to mobilize the population by evoking elements of their collective identity – of their collective sense of who they are together to solve the crisis. This led us to think that dignity, recognition, and group membership have a lot to do with what may define a successful society.

Along similar lines, health experts in British Columbia have shown that variations in suicide rates across First Nation tribes can be explained in large part by the extent to which tribes are able to pass on to their youth a sense of pride in their shared past and common future and to teach them to respect, honor, and take responsibility for their cultural heritage; their collective identity. This case exemplifies the importance of promoting recognition of a wide range of people as a dimension of societal success. Similarly, we have evidence that the election of Barack Obama mattered for the well-being of some African-Americans,

as it signaled change in their cultural membership within the American polity.

Within the context of our program, I considered the bridging of group boundaries as a dimension of successful societies. I analyzed how members of low-status groups respond to their stigmatization. Whether or not societies make available cultural repertoires that empower them to not be "losers" is important from the perspective of societal success. Whether societies sustain multiple matrixes for defining a worthy life is crucial, and this is the question which we consider in our next book "Social Resilience in the Age of Neo-Liberalism," which we hope to complete next year. Stay tuned.

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References

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