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THE PHENOMENON OF RELATIVE DEPRIVATION AND THE SOCIO-PHILOSOPHICAL INTERPRETATION OF INTER-CIVIC CONFLICT

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Abstract. This article offers a socio-philosophical interpretation of relative deprivation and of its part in the formation of inter-civic conflict. The study proceeds from the observation that deprivation is not a quantity but a relation: it exists only as the discrepancy between what a person believes himself entitled to and what he receives, and therefore presupposes a standard of comparison that the facts of his condition do not supply. The philosophical contribution lies precisely there, since the reference group furnishing the standard is socially constituted rather than naturally given, and its constitution has been transformed by the universal visibility of other people’s circumstances. Four conditions are established under which deprivation acquires conflictual force, and the distinction between egoistic and fraternalistic deprivation is shown to determine whether distress is borne individually or becomes collective action. The polemic between T.R. Gurr and C. Tilly concerning grievance and mobilisation is subjected to critical examination.

Keywords: relative deprivation, inter-civic conflict, reference group, fraternalistic deprivation, social justice, expectations, legitimacy of inequality, mobilisation, social comparison, Tocqueville paradox, social philosophy.

INTRODUCTION

Among the regularities established by the comparative study of civic conflict, one has proved resistant to common sense: there is no dependable relation between the absolute severity of material conditions and the readiness of a population to enter into open antagonism. Societies of great poverty have remained quiescent for generations, and antagonism has broken out where conditions were visibly improving. A. de Tocqueville recorded the paradox in its classic form, observing that the French monarchy became most vulnerable while it was reforming, and that evils endured patiently so long as they appear inevitable become intolerable the instant escape from them is conceived. The relevant variable is therefore not the condition itself but something in the relation of people to it. That something is what the literature of the social sciences has termed relative deprivation. The concept received its first systematic use in the studies of military personnel by S. Stouffer and his colleagues, which produced the anomalous finding that satisfaction with one’s prospects bore no simple relation to one’s actual prospects: soldiers in branches offering rapid advancement were more dissatisfied than those in branches offering little, each judging his position not by its absolute merits but by the positions of those around him. Where promotion was general, failure to obtain it marked a man out; where it was rare, it did not. T.R. Gurr subsequently developed the concept into a general account of political violence, defining relative deprivation as the perceived discrepancy between value expectations and value capabilities. The socio-philosophical interest of the concept, however, lies in a feature that the empirical literature tends to treat as a technical difficulty rather than as the heart of the

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matter. Deprivation in this sense is not a quantity possessed by a person or group but a relation between two terms, of which only one is given by the facts. What a person receives may be measured; what he believes himself entitled to cannot be read off from his circumstances, since it depends upon a standard of comparison supplied neither by nature nor by the material world but by the social constitution of the reference group against which he measures himself. Two persons in identical conditions may therefore stand in entirely different relations of deprivation, and the difference is not a distortion of perception but a genuine difference in their situation, the entitlement each acknowledges being a real social fact. The question from which analysis must begin is therefore not how much people have but with whom they compare themselves, and this question is philosophical before it is sociological. Reference groups are not chosen arbitrarily but constituted by the structures through which people see one another, and those structures were historically narrow. A person's standard of the normal was furnished by his village, his trade and his station; the circumstances of distant and differently placed people were known vaguely if at all, and were not regarded as a measure applicable to oneself. Very large objective inequalities could therefore persist without generating a corresponding sense of deprivation, because the comparison that would have disclosed them was never made. That limitation has been removed, and its removal is the principal change in the conditions of this problem. The circumstances of others are now continuously visible, and visible in a selected and favourable presentation, so that the standard of the normal is assembled from the most advantageous portions of a great many lives. The reference group has ceased to be local and has become unbounded. The consequence is a historically novel possibility: objective improvement may proceed together with a rising sense of deprivation, since the standard rises faster than the condition, and the Tocqueville paradox has in this respect become a general feature of the environment. A second distinction is required before the concept can bear analytical weight, and W.G. Runciman supplied it. Deprivation may be experienced egoistically, as the discrepancy between one's own position and that of others taken individually, or fraternalistically, as the discrepancy between the position of one's group and another's. The distinction is consequential because the two issue in different conduct. Egoistic deprivation produces individual responses — effort, resentment, withdrawal, migration, distress borne privately — and is politically inert; fraternalistic deprivation produces collective responses, furnishing both a grievance and a ready-made collectivity to bear it. The transition from the first to the second is accordingly the decisive event in the formation of inter-civic conflict, and it is a transition in interpretation rather than in circumstance: the same disadvantage, formerly attributed to one's own position or to chance, comes to be attributed to one's membership of a group. For Uzbekistan the analysis bears upon a situation of rapid change. Economic reform, growing mobility and the diffusion of network access have simultaneously raised objective conditions for much of the population and widened considerably the field of comparison within which those conditions are judged, the young being the most exposed to the second effect. The relevant indicator in such circumstances is therefore not the measured distribution of goods alone but the relation between expectation and attainment, which may deteriorate in a period during which every objective indicator improves. The scholarly problem arises from the treatment of relative deprivation as a psychological variable to be measured rather than a relation whose second term is socially constituted, and from the consequent neglect of how reference groups are formed. The aim of the article is to provide a socio-philosophical interpretation of relative deprivation and of its part in the formation of inter-civic conflict. The tasks were to establish the relational structure of the concept; to determine the conditions under which

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deprivation acquires conflictual force; to analyse the transformation of reference groups; and to establish the appropriate indicators. The novelty consists in treating the reference group as the properly philosophical term of the relation, in the four conditions of conflictual force, and in the account of the unbounded reference group as a novel source of deprivation under improving conditions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Within Uzbek scholarship the foundation of the present study is supplied by the work of M. Bekmurodov on the sociology of Uzbek society. His examination of the mahalla as an institution of everyday social regulation bears directly upon the present inquiry, since the mahalla functions as a reference community in the strict sense: it supplies the standard of the ordinary against which households judge their circumstances, and does so for a membership constituted territorially rather than by condition, so that the comparison it organises runs across rather than along the lines of material difference. His analysis of structural transformation under reform indicates the conditions under which such local standards are displaced by wider ones. The second pillar of the theoretical framework is provided by the research of Q. Nazarov in the field of axiology and the general problems of philosophy. His treatment of value as a relation between an object and a valuing subject, rather than a property of the object, supplies the categorial apparatus the present argument requires, since relative deprivation is a value relation of just this kind: the same objective holding is a sufficiency or a deficiency according to the standard applied. His account of the formation of value orientations indicates further that the standards by which people judge their condition are acquired socially and may therefore be influenced, which grounds the preventive conclusions offered below. The value and institutional dimensions of the question are illuminated by contemporary research: S. Ergashbaev demonstrates that stable value orientations are formed through sustained processes of continuous education rather than isolated influences, and in a further study singles out independent critical reflection as a central educational outcome, while M.M. Mirzaolimjon og‘li and E. Shohbozbek disclose the institutional context of educational reform. Several international traditions bear upon the problem. A. de Tocqueville recorded the paradox of rising expectation under reform; S. Stouffer and his colleagues introduced relative deprivation upon empirical material; W.G. Runciman distinguished its egoistic from its fraternalistic form and connected the latter to conceptions of social justice; T.R. Gurr developed the concept into a general theory of political violence; and J. Davies formulated the J-curve, by which the dangerous conjunction is improvement followed by sharp reversal. C. Tilly objected that grievances are nearly universal while collective action is rare, so that the explanatory burden falls upon organisation and opportunity. The gap addressed here is the absence of a philosophical account of the term by which deprivation is measured.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodological foundation of the study is constituted by the socio-philosophical approach, which made it possible to treat relative deprivation not as a psychological magnitude awaiting measurement but as a relation whose terms stand in need of analysis, and in particular to subject to examination the term that the empirical literature ordinarily takes as given; within this framework the axiological approach performed the leading function, the entitlement against which attainment is measured being a value standard rather than a fact, while the dialectical method analysed the

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contradiction between rising attainment and rising expectation as a relation productive of its own consequences rather than an anomaly. The theoretical analysis of philosophical, sociological and social-psychological literature reconstructed the conceptions of deprivation, reference group and social justice, while the historical-comparative method examined cases in which conflict arose under improving conditions and in which it did not, in order to isolate the conditions of conflictual force. Conceptual analysis was applied to the structure of the deprivation relation and to its egoistic and fraternalistic forms. The hermeneutic method interpreted the attributions by which disadvantage is assigned to personal circumstance, to chance or to group membership, since this attribution rather than the disadvantage effects the transition between the two forms. Secondary analysis was applied to published sociological data on satisfaction, perceived justice and expectation, with attention to discrepancies between objective indicators and reported states, and content analysis of public and network discourse established the reference standards in circulation and the manner of their presentation. Conceptual modelling produced the four conditions and the indicators, which expert assessment verified. General scientific procedures of analysis and synthesis, induction and deduction, abstraction and generalisation were applied at every stage and secured the coherence of the conclusions.

RESULTS

Relative deprivation was found to possess a relational structure whose terms are of different epistemic status: attainment is a fact admitting of measurement, whereas entitlement is a value standard supplied by a reference group and yielded by no examination of a person's circumstances. The properly philosophical question is accordingly the constitution of reference groups, which are determined by the structures of visibility obtaining in a society rather than by those of interaction, so that a person may compare himself with people he will never meet and not with people he meets daily. From this follows the first substantive result, the unbinding of the reference group. Where visibility was local, large objective inequalities generated little deprivation because the comparison disclosing them was not made; where visibility is universal and selectively presented, the standard of the ordinary is assembled from the most favourable portions of many lives, so that objective improvement and rising deprivation may proceed together. A second result establishes four conditions under which deprivation acquires conflictual force rather than issuing in private distress. The first is the fraternalistic form: the disadvantage must be attributed to group membership rather than to personal circumstance, since only then does it carry a collectivity with it. The second is perceived illegitimacy: a discrepancy believed to arise from merit or accepted rules produces resentment of oneself or of fortune, one believed to arise from arrangement produces resentment of those who arranged it. The third is attributability to an identifiable agent, since a grievance without an addressee cannot be acted upon. The fourth is perceived alterability, which supplies the Tocquevillean element, conditions regarded as immutable being endured and the same conditions regarded as alterable becoming intolerable. A third result concerns the asymmetry of the relation under improvement: since expectation is formed by comparison and attainment by circumstance, a period of general improvement raises the first faster than the second for those improving more slowly than the average, so that the group benefiting least from a successful reform may experience the sharpest increase in deprivation. Finally, four indicators were established: the discrepancy between measured attainment and reported sufficiency; the breadth of the reference standard invoked in self-assessment; the

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proportion of disadvantages attributed to membership rather than circumstance; and the perceived legitimacy of existing differences, which distinguishes a tolerable from an intolerable inequality more reliably than magnitude.

DISCUSSION

The results require to be situated within the principal controversy of conflict studies, the dispute between the grievance tradition represented by T.R. Gurr and the mobilisation tradition represented by C. Tilly. In Why Men Rebel, T.R. Gurr set out an account in which relative deprivation constitutes the necessary precondition of political violence: discontent arises from the perceived discrepancy between value expectations and capabilities, becomes politicised when attributed to the political order, and issues in violence in proportion to its intensity and scope. The account is psychological in foundation and general in ambition, and was for two decades the dominant explanation of civil strife. C. Tilly advanced an objection of considerable force. Grievances, he observed, are nearly universal: in any society of appreciable size many groups have at any moment substantial reason for dissatisfaction, whereas collective action is rare and unevenly distributed, and a variable always present cannot explain an outcome usually absent. What varies, and therefore explains, is the capacity to act: internal organisation, available resources, the networks through which coordination becomes possible, and the opportunities afforded by the configuration of power. On this account the study of deprivation addresses a constant and neglects the variables that determine whether anything follows from it. The substance of the disagreement concerns whether the explanandum is the willingness to act or the capacity to act, and two further contributions clarify it. W.G. Runciman's distinction between the egoistic and fraternalistic forms indicates that the grievance tradition had conflated two conditions of different standing, since only the fraternalistic form carries a collectivity and is capable of mobilisation at all; much of what Tilly treats as the absence of grievance may be grievance in its politically inert form. J. Davies' J-curve indicates, in the same direction, that the trajectory of deprivation matters more than its magnitude, a sharp reversal after sustained improvement being more dangerous than a steady level of severe disadvantage. The position advanced here is that the two traditions address different stages of one process and that the dispute is sustained by their failure to say so. Deprivation determines the potential for conflict, establishing which populations possess a grievance capable of bearing collective interpretation; without it mobilisation has nothing to mobilise. Organisation and opportunity determine whether that potential is actualised. Tilly is right that grievance alone predicts poorly, and for the reason he gives; Gurr is right that a theory of mobilisation without grievance explains how action occurs and not why this population rather than another. The socio-philosophical contribution lies at a point neither addresses, the constitution of the standard by which deprivation is reckoned, and it carries a practical consequence: the standard being social rather than natural, a policy that improves conditions without attending to the comparisons in circulation may raise the deprivation it was meant to relieve.

CONCLUSION

The study has shown that relative deprivation is not a quantity but a relation, and that of its two terms only one is given by the facts. Attainment may be measured; entitlement is a value standard supplied by a reference group, and the constitution of reference groups is accordingly the properly philosophical question in this field and the one the empirical literature has treated as a technical

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difficulty. First, reference groups were shown to be determined by structures of visibility rather than of interaction, and the unbinding of visibility to produce a situation in which the standard of the ordinary is assembled from the most favourable portions of many lives; objective improvement and rising deprivation may therefore proceed together, which generalises the Tocqueville paradox into a standing feature of the environment. Second, four conditions were established under which deprivation acquires conflictual force: the fraternalistic form, attributing disadvantage to group membership rather than circumstance; perceived illegitimacy, which directs resentment outward; attributability to an identifiable agent; and perceived alterability. Third, the asymmetry of the relation under improvement was demonstrated: the group benefiting least from a successful reform may experience the sharpest rise in deprivation. Fourth, indicators were established — the discrepancy between measured attainment and reported sufficiency, the breadth of the reference standard, the proportion of disadvantages attributed to membership, and the perceived legitimacy of existing differences, the last distinguishing a tolerable from an intolerable inequality more reliably than magnitude. The analysis of the controversy between the grievance and mobilisation traditions established that they address successive stages of one process, and that improvement of conditions without attention to the comparisons in circulation may raise the deprivation it was meant to relieve. Further research might address the measurement of reference-group breadth.

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