Becoming Political: Facets of Political Socialization in East-Central Europe (An Introduction)

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Abstract

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The article introduces the thematic issue of Forum Historiae, which examines the processes of politicization and political socialization in Central and East-Central Europe during the 19th and early 20th centuries. It situates these phenomena within the broader context of modernizing and nationalizing states, focusing on the challenges of analysing initial politicization among non-elite and subaltern populations. Drawing on insights from social science and historical research, the article critiques static and overly normative frameworks of political socialization and emphasizes the need for a nuanced understanding of how political awareness develops across diverse social, cultural, and generational contexts.

Politicization, political awareness and political consciousness are relatively broad and somewhat ambiguous concepts, particularly when considered from the long-term perspective or through the varied analytical lenses of social sciences and humanities. Systematic research on these topics has been ongoing since the late 1950s, with the scholarship focusing mainly on complex systemic features, institutional preconditions and cognitive dispositions within processes broadly referred to as political socialization.[1] Over the subsequent decades, research within the fields of social sciences has expanded significantly in both scope and depth; nevertheless, it is possible to identify three general areas of interest around which the various studies have—directly or indirectly—revolved. These focal points can be expressed in the form of three simplified questions: At what stage in an individual's life does political socialization occur, and when does the development of political consciousness typically begin? Through which channels and within what contexts does this process unfold, and who acts as the primary and secondary agents of political socialization? Finally, once political consciousness has been developed, does it persist as a stable component of an individual's cognitive framework, or can it diminish or even disappear entirely over the course of their life?

1   WASBURN, Philo C. – ADKINS COVERT, Tawnya J. *Making Citizens. Political Socialization Research and Beyond.* Cham : Springer International Publishing; Imprint: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 3–4.

There seems to be a consensus among sociologists, social anthropologists and political scientists that an individual typically develops some sort of political consciousness—an engaged awareness of politics—as early as childhood. Debates persist concerning the phase of childhood in which the concept of politics is learned, even if in a rudimentary form, and the capacity to adopt and develop political opinions and assume stances appears most significantly, claims spanning from a very young age, as early as six, to late adolescence and early adulthood.[2] Yet, there is also an almost unanimous agreement that the primary and most important agent of political socialization is typically the family. Institutions such as schools, churches, the workplace, voluntary associations, and the media are often regarded as other important agents or channels contributing to the development of political consciousness at this early stage.[3] However, what is important to note here is that political socialization in this conceptualization can be understood as a process of transmission of the concepts, attitudes and norms, and more generally, political culture from generation to generation.[4] In other words, the bulk of present social scientific research is based on recent or current historical cases of high modernity with established political regimes of mass politics, within which the contemporary generation of parents—and even grandparents—had undergone similar processes of political socialization themselves.

The prior existence of a widely shared political culture within a system where the parents and grandparents had political rights establishes a broadly different context compared to the political regimes and power structures present in the 19th and early 20th centuries in Central and East-Central Europe, which featured limited electoral regimes and various patriarchal political cultures that were greatly influenced by (de-)formative features such as corruption, patronage and clientelism. Historians of this period and region deal with situations and contexts within which politicisation and political mobilization appeared at different rates and with widely differing dynamics, and the objects and subjects of which were in parallel children, adolescents and adults of all age cohorts to a varying degree. Historians have devoted prominent attention to the social milieu, particular types of events and institutions, channels of communication through which political socialization occurred. Also, not surprisingly, politicization in general and particularly the politicization of non-privileged classes in both urban and rural environments has been studied in connec-

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2   JENNINGS, M. Kent. Political socialization. In DALTON, Russell J. – KLINGEMANN, Hans-Dieter (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Political Behavior*. Oxford; New York : Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 29–44, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199270125.003.0002; ANDERSSON, Erik. A transactional and action-oriented methodological approach to young people's political socialisation. In *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, 2020, vol. 15, no. 3, pp. 243–257, https://doi.org/10.1177/1746197919853807; HESS, Robert D. – TORNEY, Judith V. The Development of Political Attitudes in Children. In GREENBERG, Edward S. (ed.) *Political Socialization*. London; New York : Routledge, 2009 [1970], pp. 64–82.

3   WASBURN – ADKINS COVERT 2017, pp. 61–83; NEUNDORF, Anja – SMETS, Kaat. Political socialization and the making of citizens. In *Oxford Handbook Topics in Politics*. Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2017, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935307.013.98

4   On the concept of generational transmission cf. LANGTON, Kenneth P. *Political Socialization*. New York : Oxford University Press, 1969, p. 4; quoted after KUDRNÁČ, Aleš. Theoretical perspectives and methodological Approches in Political Socialization Research. In *Sociológia*, 2015, vol. 47, no. 6, p. 607.

tion to nationalism, especially minority and peripheral nationalist movements. Therefore, the greatest focus of analyses has been placed on a particular type of agent—nationalist and social movement activists—and on a particular type of discourse produced by nationalist movements.

The dynamics of politicization and political mobilization were shaped by nationalist conflict, competition between the central and dominant state-promoted and peripheral counter-discourses that targeted, with varying degrees of success, the subaltern strata of the population—viewed by most agents of politicization as politically ignorant and nationally lukewarm, in danger of being deceived and abused, and therefore in need of "true" and "proper" political education. While a similar description would no doubt, in some respects, fit the societal and political situation in many present-day Central and East-Central European states, an important distinction remains regarding the pace, intensity, and multigenerational nature of the processes related to the initial politicization. Therefore, it is perhaps not that surprising that the historical and social scientific research follows parallel paths, with little connection or interaction between the two.

Concerning historical research covering the roughly century long period from late 1840s to late 1940s in Central and East-Central Europe, the phenomenon of the initial politicisation of adults is of essential importance, especially in the case of the non-privileged and non-elite strata of the population. Recent historical research has successfully deconstructed and moved beyond the biased conception of the ignorant peasant, according to which the peasantry was characterized by "sheer ignorance and helplessness outside the confines of their region."[5] Similarly questioned were the notions that within the systems of the 19th and 20th centuries modernizing states, the "state" and "government" were nebulous concepts to them, and that they were ignorant of political ideology and larger societal issues not manifestly connected to their self-preservation, farming, local economy, and religion.[6] Quite the contrary, works such as those by Keely Stauter-Halsted and Andriy Zayarnyuk[7] on the peasantry and Jakub Beneš and Maarten Van Ginderachter[8] on workers move beyond the level of

5   HOBSBAWM, Eric J. Peasants and Politics. In *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 1973, vol. 1, no. 1, p. 9.

6   WEBER, Eugen. The Second Republic, Politics, and the Peasant. In *French Historical Studies*, 1980, vol. 11, no. 4, pp. 521–550; WEBER, Eugen. Comment la Politique Vint aux Paysans: A Second Look at Peasant Politicization. In *The American Historical Review*, 1982, vol. 87, no. 2, pp. 357–389.

7   STAUTER-HALSTED, Keely. *The Nation in the Village. The Genesis of Peasant National Identity in Austrian Poland, 1848–1914*. Ithaca; London : Cornell University Press, 2001; ZAYARNYUK, Andriy. *Framing the Ukrainian Peasantry in Habsburg Galicia, 1846–1914*. Edmonton : Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 2013; other works can also be mentioned in this regard, among them, for instance STRUVE, Kai. *Bauern und Nation in Galizien. Über Zugehörigkeit und soziale Emanzipation im 19. Jahrhundert*. Göttingen : Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005; studies in ŘEPA, Milan (ed.) *Peasants into Citizens. The Politicisation of Rural Areas in Central Europe (1861–1914)*. Wiesbaden : Harassowitz, 2020; LORENZ, Torsten, (ed.) *Cooperatives in Ethnic Conflicts: Eastern Europe in the 19th and Early 20th Century*. Berlin : Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag, 2006; and LAUWERS, Karen –SUODENJOKI, Sami – BEYEN, Marnix (eds.) *Subaltern Political Subjectivities and Practices in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. Between Loyalty and Resistance*. New York; London : Routledge, 2023.

8   BENEŠ, Jakub. *Workers and Nationalism. Czech and German Social Democracy in Habsburg Austria, 1890–1918*. Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2017; GINDERACHTER, Maarten Van. *The Everyday Nationalism of Workers: A Social History of Modern Belgium*. Stanford, CA : Stanford University Press, 2019.

anonymous masses—that is, an approach where the referents are mere social categories—and attempt to bring into view the individual peasants and workers, or more broadly the rural and urban subordinate, as conscious actors who reacted to, interpreted and adapted rather than simply learned the ideas and norms promoted and imposed by the state and by agents of nationalist and social movements.

Another line of research, while not directly focused on the phenomenon of politicization, touches upon it, even if indirectly, and introduces some widely discussed and at times provocative ideas through exploration of the phenomenon conceptualized as "national indifference." The concept itself is vague enough to include a wide variety of social subjects on the receiving side of nationalist activism, practices and discourses. Essentially, it denotes any resistance, refusal or denial to accept the nationalist or nationalism-inspired categories of exclusive national belonging, along with all consequences for everyday social practices, whether in a rural environment[9] or an urban context,[10] particularly in the bi- or polylingual borderlands. As elaborated especially by Tara Zahra,[11] the concept suggests that national indifference may not refer solely to the refusal of national self-identification based on ignorance or simple disinterest in nationalist worldviews and categories. It may also represent a conscious attitude—a deliberate and informed stance of refusal. While in the former, "national indifference" may align with "political indifference," in the latter, a conscious attitude and informed stance of refusal may indicate an actor who is politically well aware.[12]

Such an understanding, however, depends greatly on how we delineate and define political awareness, or more crudely put, the outcome of processes referred to as politicization or political socialization. This becomes particularly relevant in the context of initial politicization, which describes the gradual and often diffuse process through which the first generation of adults became, in one way or another, critically cognizant of the discursive, conceptual and categorical frameworks of politics in modernising and nationalising states of

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9   JUDSON, Pieter. *Guardians of the Nation. Activists on the Language Frontiers of Imperial Austria.* Cambridge, Massachusetts; London : Harvard University Press, 2006; ERDELJAC, Filip. Between nationalism and indifference. The gradual elimination of indifference in interwar Yugoslavia. In GINDERACHTER, Maarten Van – FOX, Jon (eds.) *National Indifference and the History of Nationalism in Modern Europe.* London; New York : Routledge, 2019, pp. 106–126.

10   KING, Jeremy. *Budweisers into Czechs and Germans. A Local History of Bohemian Politics, 1848 – 1948.* Princeton; Oxford : Princeton University Press, 2002.

11   ZAHRA, Tara. Imagined noncommunities: National indifference as a category of analysis. In *Slavic Review*, 2010, vol. 69, no. 1, pp. 93–119; JUDSON, Pieter M. – ZAHRA, Tara. Introduction. In *Austrian History Yearbook*, 2012, vol. 43, pp. 21–27.

12   Among others, David Feest has drawn attention to this issue in his case study of Klaus Scheel, a successful banker, businessman and public figure in interwar Estonia. Feest argues that the most suitable framework for applying the concept of national indifference (as proposed by Zahra) is biographical analysis—specifically, the study of individuals, rather than groups or population categories, for whom sufficient source material exists to examine national self-categorizations or self-representations (referred to by Feest as self-attributions or self-ascriptions). In Scheel's case, we are dealing with an individual who had already undergone processes of political socialization within a context where national conceptual frameworks were pervasive and significantly influenced everyday social practices. Scheel's expressions of "national indifference" or "ethnic opportunism" likely represented a consciously employed, situationally conditioned tactic or strategy of action. FEEST, David. Spaces of 'national indifference' in biographical research on citizens of the Baltic republics 1918–1940. In *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 2017, vol. 48, no. 1, pp. 55–66.

the 19th and early 20th centuries. According to Eugene Weber, politicization of the peasantry meant first of all the recognition that village affairs were directly affected by powers and forces well beyond the village or local milieu, which was followed by action as a consequence of that recognition; participation in elections for the central parliament that represented a political and economical marketplace far wider than anything the village had considered before.[13] In other words, politicization in the case of 19th-century peasants (Weber's analysis focuses specifically on the peasantry in France) involved the development of an awareness "that alternatives exist, that choices are possible, that political activities are not about irrelevant abstractions but are closely related to social and economic concerns that are local, personal, and immediate."[14]

Roughly a decade before Weber, political scientist Edward Greenberg proposed a general working definition of political socialization as "the process by which the individual acquires attitudes, beliefs, and values relating to the political system of which he is a member and to his own role as citizen within that system."[15] More recent literature is notably scarce in offering such ideal-typical definitions, which is not that surprising. Already in 1970, Greenberg observed that earlier researchers often felt compelled to redefine the concept of political socialization from scratch, resulting in a proliferation of descriptions that did not contribute to any further clarity in studying the phenomenon.[16] Broad, general definitional approaches like those suggested by Weber or Greenberg certainly have the advantage of avoiding constraints on the conceptual utility of a definition, thus preventing it from becoming overly normative or static for historical analysis.

Even with definitions framed as broadly and generally as these, caution is needed to avoid potential reductionism. As the body of work by the Subaltern Studies Collective—and the research it has inspired—has poignantly pointed out, the politicization of non-privileged strata in the context of modernizing states is not merely about understanding or interpreting the effects of politics, power, social and political order or regime through the lens of the elite and holders of power.[17] This process cannot be reduced to the presumed acceptance, adoption and use of the terms, conceptual frameworks, even theoretical backgrounds as provided by elite groups—whether state representatives, officials or nationalist or social activists—on the part of the subaltern. It is crucial to recognize that at any given point during the period under consideration here,

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13   WEBER 1980, p. 524.

14   However, Weber in turn also points out that peasant participation in the election and voting for a particular candidate, for a leftist or a conservative, does not prove politicization per se. "It can just as easily reflect the survival of social cohesions and of traditional views rooted in the past." WEBER 1982, p. 358.

15   GREENBERG, Edward S. Consensus and Dissent: Trends in Political Socialization research. In: GREENBERG, E. S. (ed.) *Political Socialization*. New Brunswick, N.J. : AldineTransaction, 1970 (2017), p. 3.

16   GREENBERG 1970, p. 3.

17   GUHA, Ranajit. *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*. Durham, N.C. : Duke University Press, 1999; GUHA, Ranajit. *Subalteern Studies II. Writings on South Asian History and Society*. Delhi : Oxford University Press, 1983; CHATTERJEE, Partha – PANDEY, Gyanendra (eds.) *Subaltern Studies VII: Writings on South Asian History and Society*. Delhi; Oxford; New York : Oxford University Press, 1992; SCOTT, James C. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance. Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven; London : Yale University Press, 1990.

individuals within populations categorically delineated as subaltern were aware of the existence of power structures, had a certain understanding of their influence on daily life and developed their own ways of responding to them.[18] The process of politicization of these groups under the conditions of the modernizing states of the 19th and 20th centuries is best understood as a social practice characterized by amalgamation, assimilation, internalization, adaptation and reinterpretation; a continuous process that in parts of the recent scholarship has often been referred to as "negotiation." In other words, when analysing non-privileged and non-elite classes, we must approach sharp normative or dichotomous distinctions—such as politicized versus non-politicized, or politically aware versus lacking political awareness—in terms of simplistic "before and after" frameworks, with caution.

The present thematic issue explores the processes of politicization and political socialization amongst a range of diverse contexts in Central and East-Central Europe. Despite differences in focus—ranging from physical culture and social networks to cultural production and elite contestations—these studies share key unifying themes that highlight the complexity and dynamism of politicization processes. They examine how diverse social actors, like peasants, workers, women and political elites, negotiated, adapted and reinterpreted political ideas and practices within their unique historical settings. The four studies that follow contribute to the discussion in innovative ways, each illuminating distinct yet interconnected aspects of political mobilization and transformation in Central and East-Central Europe.

Silvio and Marco Dorigo's article, *Slovenian Sokols in the Early Austro-Hungarian Empire (1867–1879)*, looks at gymnastic associations as agents of political socialization among the Slovenian population. Inspired by Bohemian and broader Slavic national movements, the Sokols played an important role in fostering national consciousness while grappling with tensions between Habsburg centralization and Austro-Slav ideals. By adapting the Czech Sokol model these local associations provided not only physical training, but also a platform for political socialization, linking regional aspirations with transnational Slavic ideals. The article explores the connection between physical culture and political mobilization, while an analysis of tensions between regional aspirations, national identity and imperial authority demonstrates the Sokols' role in politicizing a largely bourgeois membership and creating opportunities for broader popular engagement.

Irena Selišnik's contribution, *Political Socialization in Carniola: The Case of the Women's and Labour Movements and the Relationship between the Public and the Political*, shifts attention to social movements and networks, as well as the transformation of public and political spaces at the turn of the

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18   Probably one of the most seminal contributions in this respect is the work of James C. Scott, who studied and conceptualized subordinates' "disguised forms of resistance" as *infrapolitics*. These are subtle and, at first sight, not immediately visible acts of defiance that often elude scholarly attention. However, they are frequently well-calculated and deliberate forms of reacting to power structures, institutions, and the justice of the powerful. In effect, acts of infrapolitics are not only about evasion and circumvention but, in some cases, were also perceived by the oppressed in moral terms as the deliverance of "divine justice." Cf. SCOTT 1990, pp. 183–201.

20th century. Applying the resource mobilization theory, Selišnik examines how women's and workers' movements in Carniola overcame restrictive political frameworks to mobilize marginalised groups. She demonstrates that participation in these movements was often rooted in small-scale relationships—family ties, workplace networks and organised leisure activities—and highlights the critical role of social networks in fostering collective action through small-group participation and local alliances. Crucially, the study challenges assumptions of political passivity by illustrating how individuals, particularly women and workers, developed the skills and confidence to engage in public life. Selišnik's excellent analysis reveals political socialization as a gradual, multi-layered process shaped by embedded social connections and external opportunities.

Staging Crisis: Political Cabarets in the Early 1930s Vienna and Budapest by Sára Bagdi focuses on the interwar period and urban spaces—cabaret venues, theaters, and labor halls—as sites of political expression and resistance during the socioeconomic crises of the Great Depression. Exploring the role of political satire and labor culture as tools for political socialization and mobilization, the paper analyzes cabarets staged by the Socialist Event Group in Vienna and the Barátság speaking choir in Budapest and highlights how cultural production functioned both as a form of political agitation and as a critical response to local socioeconomic conditions. Importantly, Bagdi reveals how these performances not only reflected local realities, but also drew on international trends, demonstrating the transfer and adaptability of left-wing cultural initiatives within labor movements. This comparative approach highlights the interplay between transnational influences and local responses, offering valuable insight into how politicization unfolds through cultural and performative mediums.

Václav Kaška's study, *Communists as the Heirs of Capitalism? The Dynamic Politicization of Zlín/Gottwaldov Post-1945*, examines the politicization of a factory town during Czechoslovakia's postwar transition to socialism, exposing how institutions like the Baťa factory served as both arenas and instruments of political socialization. By identifying four factions within the regional communist elites and analysing their competing narratives about the city's capitalist past—the "post-Baťa" faction sought to reconcile socialist ideals with Baťa's modernizing achievements, while the "anti-Baťa" narrative rejected this legacy entirely—Kaška challenges simplistic notions of unidirectional Sovietization. Instead, the study illustrates how local actors, shaped by their backgrounds and lived experiences, negotiated and adapted ideological perspectives within a highly politicized public sphere to fit regional contexts.

Together, these articles provide new insights into the processes of politicization and political socialization by examining a diverse range of agents, spaces and strategies, revealing how cultural groups, social networks, ideological discourses and local conflicts shaped political consciousness and mobilization across different historical contexts. The studies underscore the significance of institutions and networks as channels for political engagement and highlight the intersection of culture and mobilization. Cultural practices prove

to be key tools for mobilization, providing spaces where political ideas could be expressed, debated and spread. By situating these dynamics within broader frameworks of modernization, nationalism and state power, the papers in this issue contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how individuals and groups actively engaged with and reshaped political ideas and practices.