

**STATUS ATTAINMENT:
PREDICTABLE PATTERNS OR
TRENDLESS FLUCTUATION?**

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Chapter 2

Effects of Socio-Political Systems and Economic Development on Status Attainment¹⁰

The following discussion in this chapter focuses on two of the categories of factors listed at the beginning of this book as having important influences on the status attainment process: factors related to the socio-political system and factors related to economic development. The characteristics of state socialism and of the subsequent postcommunist transformation constitute the background for the theoretical discussion on the impact of socio-political systems on status attainment.

The main mechanisms through which socio-political systems are hypothesized to influence patterns of status attainment are adopted policies and ideologies that constitute the basis of these adopted policies. Therefore, the discussion in the first sections of this chapter focuses on policies adopted by state socialist regimes (and later modified during the postcommunist transformation) in several areas (education, employment, and income distribution) that are thought to have an important impact on social stratification.

While the policy changes in education, employment, and income distribution domains introduced during the postcommunist transformation have important consequences for the emerging patterns of status attainment, the answer to the question regarding the type of institutions that are being constructed during the transition period is also strongly related to the answer to the question regarding the shape of postcommunist social stratification. The sections discussing the impact of the postcommunist transformation therefore

¹⁰ Sections of this chapter have previously appeared in my 2011 chapter, “Structură, stratificare și mobilitate socială”, pp. 294-336, in “Sociologie”, edited by L. Vlăsceanu (Iași: Polirom) and in my 2010 article, “Status Attainment in the Post-Communist Transition in Central and Eastern Europe”, in *Calitatea Vieții* 22 (3 - 4): 321-350.

focus on theories of institutional building during the transition period and consequences of each type of institutional construction on social stratification.

Since socialist and postcommunist effects on status attainment operate concomitantly with economic development effects and are often impossible to separate, part of the discussion in this chapter is devoted to theories describing the latter type of effects. The discussion revolves around mechanisms through which economic development is hypothesized to influence change in several status attainment parameters. The chapter concludes with a list of research questions developed on the basis of the earlier theoretical discussion.

2.1 The Impact of Communism on Status Attainment

State socialist societies have been described by Lenski (1978) as experiments in destratification. The very process of following one of their most important goals – increasing equality – has generated certain expected and certain unexpected consequences for these societies. Even though, depending on their histories and cultures, the socialist experience might have been different in each of the Central and Eastern European societies, the common ideology and common economic and political systems they shared produced a degree of similarity in the experiences of these countries. All of these societies sought to introduce policies regarding education, employment, income differentials and the transmission of large scale property that were intended to create a more egalitarian distribution of social rewards.

However, the actual transformations achieved by the communist regimes in the stratification sphere have not always closely matched the goals of the communist ideology regarding social stratification. Previous studies noted that these societies were more successful in some areas than in others in implementing their destratification goals (Connor, 1979; Lane, 1982). This section describes these policies and their emerging consequences on social stratification. The theories discussed in this section tend to dismiss cultural, historical, and institutional peculiarities of societies and focus on the commonalities that capitalism, communism and postcommunism create in social stratification systems.

2.1.1 Education Policies

In the educational area, socialist societies introduced policies aimed at reducing inequality by facilitating the access of underprivileged groups to education. Educational reforms at the beginning of the communist regime stipulated enrolment quotas for children of farmers and workers in order to encourage them to get more education, comparable to children coming from different family backgrounds. “Using the educational system as a tool to induce

changes in the social structure has been the declared goal of complex, state coordinated social policies undertaken after switching to state socialism” (Mach & Peschar, 1990, p. 93). Socialist societies also provided higher education free of charge and built subsidized student dorms that allowed easier access to higher education for children coming from modest social origins. Not only were the chances of pursuing education increased for children from underprivileged families, but also the opportunities for children coming from families in high position were decreased: bourgeois social origins could constitute an obstacle to being admitted to higher education (Ganzeboom & Nieuwbeerta, 1999, pp. 340-341).

Socialist regimes also sought to reduce gender inequalities in educational attainment, as part of a greater effort to achieve gender equality in labor market outcomes and wages. A study examining educational levels during communism for men and women in Bulgaria, the Czech part of Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland and Russia, finds that “women have increased their educational attainment more than men” and that “by 1975, none of the countries displayed much difference between men and women in terms of years of schooling”(Ganzeboom & Nieuwbeerta, 1999, p. 347).

The intention of policy makers was to reduce the role of education in the process of transmission of parental advantages. Low occupational and educational social origins status was supposed to no longer constitute a disadvantage in socialist societies. “It was one of the central aims of the socialist revolutions to remove, or at least weaken, ascriptive factors in the process of social reproduction on all their levels” (Haller, 1990, p. xvi).

However, the policies aimed at reducing inequality by facilitating the access of underprivileged groups to education are thought to have been less effective than intended. There are several explanations for the apparent failure of socialist educational policies. One explanation stresses the limitations of state policies in influencing individuals’ behavior and the ingenuity of people when faced with the prospect of a drop in their or their children’s status: “it is probably an illusion to believe that the life chances of children from various backgrounds can easily be regulated by centrally governed policies. Even in situations calling for extreme measures, people will always try to find a way to provide their children with a good education” (Ganzeboom & Nieuwbeerta, 1999, p. 342). Szelenyi and Aschaffenburg (1993) hypothesize that at least in Hungary, the quota system, while still in place, was circumvented by parents through the use of bribes and misrepresentation of their class origins. It is probable that these behaviors were also present in the other state socialist societies.

There is also evidence that the policies were not strictly followed, especially after the early ‘orthodox’ period of communism during the 1950s (Hanley & McKeever, 1997), effectively undermining the intended consequence

of equalizing educational opportunities. While the regimes might have been committed to the goal of increased equality of educational opportunity and decreased importance of ascription, other goals such as rapid economic development were dependent upon the existence of educated personnel and skilled workers. It seems that under these conditions, communist regimes chose to relax practices related to the former goal and enhance practices related to the latter goal (Hanley & McKeever, 1997).

The failure of educational policies has also been explained as an unintended effect of socialist stratification. It is generally accepted that while socialist societies were successful at reducing economic inequality, they replaced one type of stratification based on economic criteria with another type of stratification based on political criteria (party membership and bureaucratic position) (Eyal et al., 1998; Hanley & McKeever, 1997; Lenski, 2001). The advantaged class under these regimes was a small political elite which had access to opportunities and lifestyles inaccessible to the masses. Although at the beginning of the communist period the political elite tended to be proletarianized, later its composition included mainly intellectuals (Hanley & McKeever, 1997; Konrád & Szelenyi, 1979; Lane, 1982). This class possessed both high educational resources and the political power and social networks necessary to influence educational outcomes for their children. Furthermore, once the new socialist elites consolidated their power, the initial negative discrimination against pre-socialist elites in access to education was relaxed (therefore allowing once again the professional class to reproduce their advantages) and replaced with practices benefiting the educated socialist elites (further reinforcing the status maintenance aspect of the educational system) (Hanley & McKeever, 1997). This is a possible explanation for the reason education continued to function as a mechanism of transmission of status in socialist societies, at comparable levels with Western industrial societies. Connor (1979) notes that, paradoxically, elite sons enjoyed better guaranteed status maintenance in Eastern Europe compared to Western industrialized societies. From this point of view, the emergence of a new principle of social stratification, an unintended consequence of state socialism, poses an unforeseen obstacle to the goals of reducing educational ascription and increasing equality of educational opportunities.

Empirical evidence on trends in educational ascription and equality of educational opportunity in socialist societies is, however, mixed. While some studies suggest that the level of educational ascription in Eastern Europe under communism has been stable and comparable to educational ascription in Western industrialized countries (Connor, 1979; Hanley & McKeever, 1997; Heyns & Bialecki, 1993; Mateju, 1993; S. Szelenyi & Aschaffenburg, 1993), other studies show that there is a trend of decline in the importance of social

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origins in socialist societies, bringing levels under Western industrialized levels (Ganzeboom & Nieuwebeerta, 1999; Mach & Peschar, 1990; Meyer et al., 1979; Slomczynski, 1986).

The explanation of over-time trends and the comparison with Western industrialized countries are further complicated by the existence of the process of educational expansion, both in socialist societies and in Western industrialized societies. Under these conditions, it is hard to disentangle the effects of socialist ideology and policy on educational ascription. Hanley and McKeever (1997) document a decrease of educational ascription in Hungary in the early socialist period, concomitant with a process of educational expansion, and a later increase in educational ascription, following a process of educational contraction. They therefore link trends in educational ascription to the process of educational expansion, rather than socialist policies of increasing equality of educational opportunities.

The conflicting conclusions in previous studies might be related to several factors: employed data sources¹¹, measurement of the social origins variable, sample and time period under study¹², and type of model employed¹³. The empirical analysis in this study will utilize a common methodological framework for the estimation of effects of social origins on education both across time and across countries, allowing the computation of comparable estimates of educational ascription within the framework of the status attainment model¹⁴.

¹¹ Reliance on official statistics provided by socialist governments might lead more readily to the conclusion of decreasing educational ascription.

¹² Social origins are operationalized containing a different combination of indicators (mother's education and occupation, father's education and occupation, parental socio-economic statuses). Samples vary across studies – some estimate effects only for men, some for both sexes. Different processes during the early and late period of socialism also make comparisons based on different time spans difficult.

¹³ While status attainment models and OLS regressions compute linear effects that combine the influence of mass educational expansion and the effect of social selection of students, educational transitions models pioneered by Mare (1981) remove the first component and provide more clear-cut estimates of the second component. Also, the influence of social origins on educational attainment has been studied either in a cross-sectional, over-time framework, or using cohort comparisons based on cross sectional data.

¹⁴ Mare (1981) argues that linearly modeled effects in status attainment models tend to show more over time or inter-cohort stability in the educational attainment process than educational transitions models (at least for the U.S. case) because the linear effect captures two offsetting trends: decreased variance in the distribution of completed years of education which acts to diminish linear effects of social origins on education and increased effects of social origins on grade progression which increase the linear effect. Unfortunately, effects computed under the framework of the status attainment model do not make the distinction between the two components.