

Milieus as framework to analyze welfare attitudes transnationally

Alexander Seymer

Department of Sociology, University Salzburg

Correspondence: alexander.seymer@sbg.ac.at

Comparative research on welfare attitudes across EU member states often implies the concept of political culture as defined by Almond and Verba (1963). A key assumption is that homogeneity inside countries is larger than across countries. Considering the increasing globalization and transnationalism trends, the question arises, if homogeneity across certain societal groups across countries may be larger than inside countries. Several policies are pushed through EU council meetings (e.g. active labor market policies, austerity policies) providing new risks and opportunities, which produce new stratifications inside European societies. Do they follow a transnational pattern? And how could that pattern be captured and described?

The paper aims to elaborate the potential of milieus as transnational stratification concept in the context of political culture. The primary purpose is to provide a profound review of the milieu theory and separate closely related notions (e.g. lifestyle, social class). So far, milieus can be considered in a simplified manner as groups constituted by sharing a rather stable set of values and mentalities (Hradil 2012; Vester 2006). In contrast to social class, which is often operationalized along occupation, milieus orientate stronger on values and social status. As such milieus are multi-dimensional concepts and the theoretical considerations will develop a set of dimensions, which shape the analytical framework for the analysis leading to preliminary results.

Employing the analytical framework, the analysis will be conducted along three steps using different cross-sectional datasets (e.g. the European Social Survey, the European Value Study and Eurobarometer). Firstly, the data needs to be reviewed along the consistency of the different dimensions to proof reliability. Secondly, a cluster analysis shall help to identify relevant groups along the theoretically derived dimensions. Hereby, different clustering algorithms will be considered and compared to explore differences. Finally, a regression analysis with welfare attitudes as dependent variable will compare the explanatory power of the newly formed clusters (transnational milieus) against countries.

The results are of preliminary nature as the main goal is to explore the potential of milieus as alternative predictor of welfare attitudes in comparative research. Hence, the empirical analysis focuses more on the identification and consistency of transnational milieus and less on the relationship to welfare attitudes. The cautious approach to the issue rests in the review of similar attempts, which indicated significant findings in national contexts but limited results when comparing the results cross-sectional (Otte 2008; Rössel 2005). Consequently, the paper addresses primarily the operationalization of milieus applying and testing the theoretical dimensions with various datasets and methods. The application on welfare attitudes will be only confirmatory.

The outcome is beneficial for cross-sectional research on political culture as milieus showed better explanatory power than class concepts for party preferences (Otte 2008). Further, the contribution aims to improve the understanding of cultural factors explaining behavior in general. Throughout the last decade, cultural predictors like values gained significant attention, but still lack meso level conceptualizations going beyond a pure micro-macro differentiation. Milieus seem a promising and challenging theory to capture these influences.

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