

Communication breakdown: the case of extending paid maternity leave in Estonia

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The case

Population trends in Estonia have been an issue of growing concern in the national political debate over the past decade. In general, the decade has been a time of re-establishing democracy and market economy in a country that was occupied by the Soviet Union for fifty years. The economical considerations and money-making attitudes have prevailed at both community and individual

I spent last year living in Australia as an adult international student and, although my stay was temporary by nature, it proved to be an extremely enriching experience. In hindsight, it was perhaps the direct living experience rather than purely my academic studies that proved to be the most educational — the world indeed looks different from 'down-under'.

As highlighted by my research in Future Studies, one of the main drivers of our mid-term future, both globally and locally, will be the current population trends: how will our future be shaped by the cohorts of youths in developing countries and the ageing generations in the West?

Because of my interest in population issues, I was keen to follow the public debate in Australia over the government's initiative last year to support the families of Australia by introducing a \$3,000 lump-sum payment to parents for each newborn, along with an annual payment of \$600 per child.

Despite the differing context in respect to location, population scale and problems, the way the Australian politicians and media handled this debate seemed to offer some quite striking parallels with another discussion on a similar matter that took place two years earlier in my home country, Estonia. Although the communication breakdown here was perhaps not as evident as it was in Estonia, the arguments put by the government and by the opposition, as is so often the case with political debates, seemed quite disconnected from each other. Therefore, a brief overview of the Estonian case would perhaps be of interest to the Australian reader.

levels. The country has traditionally had high levels of education and employment for females, and birth rates have been dropping throughout the second half of the twentieth century. By 2002, with an overwhelmingly materialistic population mindset, population growth had already been negative (less than -1 per cent per annum) for almost ten years. The United Nations forecasts that the total population will fall from the current 1.35 million to 0.7 million by 2050¹, and the ratio of taxpayer to pensioner is expected to continue its downhill slide from the already-low 1.9:1².

In this context, it makes sense that all measures that might help to reverse these trends are researched. So, one of the main promises ensuring the victory of the current coalition in the 2002 elections was indeed their commitment to extending the paid maternity leave period. Their reasoning given for this in the pre-election debate was that such a policy would attract the young generation of professional and success-oriented women and encourage them to have more babies alongside their careers. While before this the social security system had entitled mothers to three prenatal months of leave paid at the level of their most

recent income (within the general sick-days insurance framework), such cover was now to be extended over the first twelve months after the birth. In order to promote the initiative and to gain wider publicity, the authors labelled it as the 'mother-fee' during the election campaign (although it was to be sex-neutral — applicable to either the mother or father, at the family's own choice).

This was the label that later put the initiative into a completely new light. As said, the campaign was successful and the initiative as such gathered strong support — it may even have been the decisive element that brought victory to the current coalition. Nevertheless, when the proposal was finally put forward in the *Riigikogu* (the national parliament), it triggered fierce attacks and launched one of the hottest public and political struggles the country had seen in years.

By that time, the initiative's original idea of compensating the loss of income that a mother would face while staying at home was no longer the focal point. Instead, the 'mother-fee' was perceived as the remuneration for a mother's work at home. And from this perspective, the initiative was suddenly viewed as extremely unjust — with the efforts of a parent at home evaluated on the basis of his/her position at work, social status and wealth.

As the story went on, there were several protest manifestations, confrontational talk shows on TV and hot disputes in internet chat rooms, comprising a public discussion of a much bigger scale than the one that took place before the elections. Finally, after making some compromises (a fixed threshold was introduced to such payments), the coalition simply applied the brute force of its majority to vote the initiative through the parliament.

What can we learn from it?

From the above, it seems quite reasonable to suggest that it was the change of context or paradigm in which the issue was viewed that caused the change in public attitudes. In addition, it should be noted that the change did not increase the political opposition to the initiative as such (the dispute revolved around a 'how much to whom' argument), but the energy level of this post-election debate was still much higher than that of the pre-election debate. In that light, it should be interesting to look into the spectrum of paradigms

that would actually have been available for discussion, and seek the implications (if any) that some of these would have had for the topic.

There is a variety of such paradigms offered in Future Studies Social Science literature — these paradigms more or less offer pictures of the same subject from different resolutions or angles. For example, Denzin and Lincoln³ list positivist/postpositivist, constructivist, feminist, ethnic, Marxist, cultural studies and queer theory in their table of paradigms, and Lincoln and Guba⁴ add the participatory approach to this list. Neumann⁵ places these paradigms under four major theoretical frameworks: Structural Functionalism, Rational Choice Theory, Symbolic Inter-



actionism and Conflict Theory. The scope of this paper necessitates that a choice must be made from among the frameworks, and only a couple of them will be observed in more detail. To simplify the choice, I will hypothesise that the Rational Choice Theory and Conflict Theory worldviews (and within the latter, the Marxist one in particular) were behind the two main approaches to the 'mother-fee' and therefore pick these, and then consider the controversy from the constructivist and postmodern viewpoints to enrich the analysis.

Rational Choice Theory worldview

Here one would assume the positivist (or modern) position that implies the realist ontology — there is a real and changeable world 'out there'. From this stand, there is a problem in society (declining population) that can be tackled by applying adequate empirical (economical) forces. It is assumed that human interactions are similar to economic trans-

actions and thus rational tradeoffs between personal wellbeing and social interests are possible and desirable.

From this perspective, the political dispute carries a mainly economic character. Traditional conservatives and liberals debate about the extent to which we should trust the 'invisible hand of the market', and about how much we should regulate or deregulate the economy. In our Estonian case, the coalition proposed that the state's interference to insure mothers against the loss of income would increase their willingness to have more babies. Although there was no hard (i.e. positivist) evidence to ground it, this argument seemed to have the support of most of the electorate.

Conflict Theory (Marxist) worldview

As with the Rational Choice model, the critical Conflict Theory (Marxist) viewpoint takes the positivistic approach to its subject — it assumes a real and tangible world 'out there'. In addition, it is similar to the previous approach in the sense that it, too, assumes 'only *one* logic'⁶ of knowing the world.

The first difference, on the other hand, is epistemological — while the Rational Choice model aims merely to take the scientific method from the natural sciences and apply it to the social sciences as closely as possible, the Marxist perspective relies instead on class analysis.

The second difference appears to be in attitudes: where positivists of the Rational Choice model try to build or *construct* new knowledge of the world or to change it (according to their sole perception of what is right), the critical Conflict Theory model aims to seek out silenced groups who would be overlooked by such a sole perception, and to doubt, question and *deconstruct* this positivist effort (and in that sense, some early roots of postmodernity might perhaps be seen in it). Here, the political dispute goes on between the right and left wings — between the representatives of ruling and subordinate classes. It is also worth noting that the dispute seems to be evergreen. Even with the traditional working class gradually disappearing in the post-industrial society, the women's movement, sexual minorities and other groups discriminated against by the current form of governance are filling the empty ground.

In our Estonian case, the opposition used this viewpoint (although they apparently discovered it too late to affect the election results) to dismiss the initial problem (the negative population trend) from the agenda, and to concentrate instead on how the proposed initiative itself would further increase exploitation and disparity in the society by devaluing the lower class's efforts and by spreading class discrimination from the workplace to people's homes. And, indeed, it was an aspect of the initiative that had been previously hidden by the ruling Rational Choice paradigm, going unnoticed in the pre-election public discussion.

In that sense, one can even agree with the Marxist point of view (expressed, for example, by Milliband⁷), whereby the initiative would clearly be seen as an attempt of the dominant class to maintain and strengthen the current social order and thus ensure the continuation of its privileged position. However, the Marxist claim that the subordinate class is engaged in this struggle '*...either to modify or improve the conditions in which*

subordination is experienced or to bring about the end of subordination altogether'⁸ seems just stunningly naive, both in the context of the given case and of overall historical experience.

Constructivist worldview

From the constructivist perspective the world is 'in here' rather than being something external and tangible. Reality is perceived to be multiple, and socially constructed by interacting human beings⁹. Unlike the Rational Choice or Marxist perspectives, humans are here assumed to be pursuing new meanings and socially accepted values rather than pure material wealth. Changes in the outside world are seen to be caused by our changing values and attitudes, not the other way around. In this context, the political debate should logically be held between the idealists and the pragmatists.

In our case, such perspective was not visibly assumed in the public discussion; the premise of the argument (more money equals more births) was widely accepted. However, if we try to view our problem (falling population) through this paradigm, we would need to abandon the assumption of a direct rational relationship between income insurance and birth rate. We would acknowledge that there is no

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universal and tangible reason for falling birth rates that can be removed by the next legal act or policy measure. Instead, in our election campaign we would have probably sought to suggest some alternative meanings to pursue in our lives, and to encourage public discussion of 'soft' issues, that is, of values.

Postmodernist worldview

The postmodern worldview seems to be definable through what it is not and what it stands against rather than what it is and what it stands for. It has emerged fundamentally as the opposition to the modernist metanarrative of great interlocking order, and thus the notions of diversity and fragmentation seem to be the two key terms required to grasp the concept. This is the worldview that we can recognise by the radical questions it presents about the current social order — the political struggle is here held between community interests and the personal freedom of the human individual.

In taking a postmodern approach to our example, we would not only question the unselfishness of the authors of the initiative (like we did in the Marxist paradigm) or the existence of an objective relationship between the number of children in the family and public policy (like we did in the constructivist

paradigm), but would also aim to deconstruct all of the unspoken assumptions underlying the three viewpoints discussed above.

Should an individual human being be concerned with the population growth rate of a nation at all? Is the state's interference in family affairs in such a pointed way tolerable? Isn't the Marxist class analysis just another hidden method for seizing more power in the name of the oppressed (like the union movement), or an attempt to silence certain groups by labelling them as oppressors (for example, men in the female discrimination debate, or whites in the Aboriginal rights debate)?

These are only a few examples of the deconstructing questions one might come up with using this paradigm. Curiously, such questions do not have only a regressive impact on the subject, as one might expect from such a deconstructive and misgiving approach. While deconstructing earlier stone-cast assumptions, the questions also tend to open up new dimensions for enquiry and construction.

Conclusion

Viewing the communication breakdown example above through different methodological frameworks, as we have done, can undoubtedly shed some



new light on the subject. Both in Australia and in Estonia (as probably in the most of the world's democracies), political discussion tends to mix the Rational Choice and Marxist worldviews, while constructivist and postmodernist approaches have not (yet?) acquired any serious place in the politician's arsenal.

Looking at the Estonian case strictly from the coalition's perspective, it appears that, had they considered other paradigms in time, their mistake of labelling the idea with a nickname that has such significant meaning in the working class context might have been avoided. On the other hand, looking at the case from the opposition's bench, the discovery that the topic might be placed into another context seems to have come too late for them.

Furthermore, both of these statements themselves appear to have been influenced by the Rational Choice theory — they imply that there is a political battlefield 'out there' where applying some measures (like assuming different viewpoints) will lead to certain results. This may or may not, in reality, be the case. However, if it is (or while this, the reality we have socially constructed for ourselves, remains), the

general lesson from the above might perhaps be that the Rational Choice and constructivist frameworks could provide appropriate tools for the coalition to use when some new initiative or program needs to be proposed. Then again, the Conflict Theory and postmodernist frameworks seem to provide the opposition with abundant resources for objections.

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References

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