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The psychology of economic transformation: The impact of the market on social institutions, status and values in a northern Albanian village

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Abstract

Using data from an income–expenditure and assets survey; in-depth interviews and a focus group, the consequences of post-communist change on social relationships, economic opportunities, status assessments and values in a northern Albanian village are analysed. The thesis is that the advent of the market introduced incentives for individual-centred and household-centred economic strategising that were not fully compatible with the economic functions of the village’s social institutions, several of which had only re-established their importance after the collapse of communism. It is shown that the power of the household head, while greater than under communism, is weakening as modernising western values and market influences spread. Similarly the key role of the clan in social and economic life is declining. Whereas traditionally, successful clan members would have provided other members with jobs, some members were now substituting financial aid for jobs, and hiring non-clan members they argued would work harder. It is shown that villagers have clear, consistent and accurate views on the change in successful wealth accumulation strategies consequent on transition. Interestingly, wealth is not an important determinant of status. In the post-communist era personal qualities such as intelligence, honesty, loyalty and generosity have come to the fore as key determinants of status. Also a rise in the importance of family reputation clearly reflects the move away from wider social criteria including political connection in status determination. © 2002 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

This paper analyses the impact of recent systemic changes on values, social relationships and economic opportunities in a northern Albanian village. It explores the extent to which the rapid switch in 1991 from central planning to a market system, following the collapse of Albanian communism, has influenced the development of community institutions, changed the relative importance of different wealth accumulation strategies and altered the values, especially the economic values and social status judgements, which underpin the operation of this community. The village investigation is thus a case-study of value change in transition. It forms part of larger inquiry into strategies of poverty alleviation, the economic results of which are reported in Lawson, McGregor, and Saltmarshe (2000).

Although there is a large literature on the economic impact of transition on former communist societies, the literature on value change is limited. While general values, that is the significance for individuals of work, family, politics and religion are similar in western and eastern Europe (Van den Broek & De Moor, 1993) there are marked differences in other respects. For example '[w]estern respondents place greater emphasis on taking initiative, achievement and having a responsible job, while eastern European subjects report less autonomy, pride, and satisfaction in their work' (Roe, Zinovieva, Dienes, & Ten Horn, 2000, p. 660). Perhaps because of experience and necessity, bribery and tax evasion are seen as less reprehensible in the transition states (Tyszka, 1999). Part of the purpose of our study was to relate value change to social change.

Values are expressed by individuals, but their ownership is social (Lewis, Webley, & Furnham, 1995). Value change may be linked to changes in social institutions, and transition drives changes in social institutions. The thesis underlying the paper is that market relations encourage a nuclear family centred, or individual-centred economic strategy. Such a strategy is incompatible with some of the most important social institutions that determine social life in the fieldwork site village. The more notable of these institutions are the household (*shtëpi*), groups of brothers (*vllazni*) and the clan (*fis*).

As a result of market incentives these institutions are changing their economic functions, and as they do so economic values are gradually becoming more consonant with a modern market system. However since social institutions strongly influence behaviour, the process of change is slow. The history of the institutions lies in tribal relations that have persisted in Albanian communities probably to a greater degree than in any other ethnic groups in the Balkans. Since these institutions are closely related to the value systems whose changes we record, they require brief explanations.

The institutions we describe are stronger in the north than in the south of Albania. They were strongly discouraged under communism (1944–1991). The key unit is the

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