

ON THE SOCIOLOGY OF OUR REGION

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Kovács, É. (ed.): *Mi újság a kelet-közép-európai szociológiában? A lengyelországi, a magyarországi, a romániai, a szerbiai és a szlovákiai szociológia a kilencvenes években.* [What Is the News in the East-Central European Sociology? Sociology in Poland, Hungary, Romania, Serbia and Slovakia in the 90s.] Budapest: Teleki László Alapítvány, 2002.

It is difficult to decide, whether it facilitates or makes the job of the reviewer more difficult if the author reflects upon practically all the critical approaches to the given work in the preface or postscript of the volume to be presented. This is the situation with the collection of papers edited by Éva Kovács and entitled *What Is the News in the East-Central European Sociology?*, exploring the condition of sociology in the region in the 90s, therefore it is worth giving the word to the Editor for a moment: “Our starting point was that the scholarly discourse of sociology is ‘produced’ and controlled primarily by universities and periodicals, therefore the main trends and changes can be identified in classrooms, in the themes of theses and doctoral dissertations, and in professional periodicals. It was stressed further on, that the changes of sociology as a discipline were put in focus, therefore institutions dedicated to public opinion polls and market research, using the methods of applied sociology, were not included in our sample (...). Thirdly, though it is known that the condition of our discipline most frequently materializes as an identity problem in papers dealing with the issue (where is the place of sociology and of the social scientist in the East-Central Europe of the turn of the millennium?), we did not intend to put this question directly.” (9)

Consequently the papers approach their topic by quantitative and qualitative methods. Some of the authors included in the volume analyzed the themes of the major periodicals that is two of each of the countries surveyed (in the order of Poland, Hungary, Romania, Serbia, and Slovakia) with the help of content analysis, trying to find an answer to the question of which topics and to what extent preoccupied the social scientists of the different countries in the 90s. Curiously however, not every one of the authors of the volume availed themselves of this method, which doubts whether it was effectively the most popular of themes and methods that had constituted the subject of the study in these cases. At the same time the individual papers (without an exception) analyzed the sociological discourse articulated in the columns of the chosen two periodicals.

For the interested reader getting acquainted with the scholarly efforts of the sociologists of the region, and what is more, even with the social scientists may offer

important lessons, as it may be assumed that the majority of the domestic representatives of the profession would be unable to list the name of, let us say, two contemporary Romanian sociologists. Though the selection of the periodicals analyzed may seem to be arbitrary in some cases, and the works of the individual researchers may appear to be of varying standard, the reader may freely make his or her choice of the sociological approaches of such social problems that have emerged in all the post-socialist countries in the 90s. Therefore it is worth mentioning particularly the "Slovakia Study" by László Gyurgyák in which one may get acquainted with an interesting theoretical experiment, trying to grasp the survival of the mentality of the state socialist period. According to the theory of residual group, that may be linked to Ján Stena's name, the unity of that group is not determined by a former personal link to the state party, but "it is characterized by the similarity of opinions and attitudes to reality created by the transformation process" (236). Therefore it is impossible to define the residual group on the basis of social status or demographic characteristics. The quest for tradition and its creation may equally be regarded as a general one in the sociology of the 90s in the countries involved. The tradition of Polish life history with its inventive autobiography competitions, and the Gusti school of Romania deserve to be mentioned.

Further on, it may be learned that the long-term competition between the committed advocates of the quantitative and qualitative methods may not necessarily be decided for the latter ones because of the shortage of money and data to be analyzed. While the processes of statistical analysis represent the criteria of scientific quality, or the pledge of international competitiveness in most cases in the eyes of social scientists, in Poland the qualitative approach has become more popular than the quantitative one by adjusting to old traditions (one should remember Znaniecki's Polish peasants). The paper written by Gyula Gombos about "Polish Sociology" is an informative one and has a uniform structure; it could function even as an autonomous publication.

Examples may be found for the fruitful interdisciplinary approach to some social phenomena in the volume, particularly for the different answers given to the question concerning the status of sociologist. An excellent example to the former one is the regionalism-discourse of "Polish Sociology", and the paper on Hungary is an example to the latter one, the backbone of which is offered by the discussion of the interpreter grasping the problem of the role of the social scientist, and the analysis of the colonization dispute on the relationship between Western and Eastern sociology, grown out of it.

Finally, one may have a look at professional discussions that are relevant for a social scientist, be it the international competitiveness of sociologists living in post-socialist countries, or the issues of 'gender-sociology'. The analysis of the 'Serbian situation' offers special lessons: can sociology exist in a society that is dominated by lasting conditions of war, when scholarly voices and political ones may hardly be distinguished from each other? At any rate, the paper in question reveals that even the identification of sociological discourse meets serious difficulties.

Though in the Preface the Editor mentions 'national sociologies' put in the focus as a shortcoming of the volume, it does not alter the disturbing fact that the individual

papers treat sociological discourses in isolation. It does not hold true for the problem referred to by Gyula Gombos in a footnote: "Perhaps it would be better to say that there is not one sociology in Poland (in other words, 'Polish sociology' is a rather unclear concept), but there are sociologies in respect of research workshops as well as of theoretical and methodological orientations. On the other hand, what makes a given sociology 'Polish'? Is it because it is being cultivated in Poland, or because those who cultivate it are Poles, or is it about Polish society, etc.? Who would decide for instance, how far Malinowski, Znaniecki, or Bauman are Polish, or Anglo-Saxon sociologists?" (13: Footnote 2) When one gets involved in the 90s of the sociology of Slovakia, the other countries become invisible, moreover, in the paper summing up the volume at its end the 'national sociologies' are mentioned one after another. Whereas the method of discourse analysis always assumes a position in the field of the text or above it of which each of the different stands may be surveyed. This position may be found at different places in the papers of the volume, and though it enhances its colorfulness, it makes comparison more difficult: it is difficult to place the detailed presentation of the women's movement in Poland and the left and right dispute of Serbia on the same platform. Is there an East-Central European approach in sociological discourse? The volume discusses extensively the phenomenon taking the West as a point of reference by the social scientists of the countries in the region, and the neighboring states have no place in this perspective. As if the authors of the volume had also accepted this attitude.

Though the addressee of the papers is not mentioned in the volume, beyond the fact that, to the reviewer's knowledge, so far it was only published in Hungarian, therefore presumably it is addressed to the Hungarian audience. It can be inferred from the fact that it is only the analyst of the sociological discourse of Hungary who gives names in the network analysis; therefore it is clear that only the reader profoundly knowing Hungarian sociology who can draw conclusions from that list of names. Hopefully an English translation would be published in the near future which would make the papers accessible by the others involved as well (though it is an interesting lesson of the writings that many members of the older generation of Polish and Slovakian sociology still read Western literature in Russian).

The researchers had the concept of locating the trends of the sociological discourse of the various countries in the interpretative framework of heritage-imitation-discovery: "The survival of national sociological thinking, primarily the post-1945 one was called heritage, copying 'Western' sociologies was called imitation, following and adaptation, and the creative utilization of the scholarly resources of their own: the implementation of new theories and methodological trends was called discovery." (7) The authors have selected those discussions they wished to deal with in detail on the basis of this model. As a uniform researcher's stand was missing, each author decided for him- or herself whether to study a trend of heritage and imitation, or of imitation and discovery in greater detail while doing the analysis of discourse. There was someone who attempted to interpret this triad of concepts with the help of Kuhn's concept of paradigm (consistently using the concept of paradigm as the synonym of scholarly school), and there was somebody else who decided intuitively whether the content of a paper would qualify as heritage, imitation, and/or discovery. It is beyond doubt that the heuristic value of the individual papers would have been reduced if a

consistent and common researcher's stand were asserted; moreover, it may have divested the readers even from the essential knowledge of what problems, approaches, and methods are important and relevant to the social scientists of the different countries. Yet, when turning the pages of the volume the following questions inevitably emerge in the reader: What is sociology? Is it in crisis? Where can it be found? Though they may cause some frustration, answering to them (or at least attempting to do so) appears to be inevitable for the sociologist of today. Hence, instead of asking the question of "What is the news in the East-Central European sociology?" another question, worded deeper, was in the reviewer's mind: Does East-Central European sociology, named in the title, exist if at all? Is it possible that it has never existed; only nostalgia of the Eastern bloc encourages an assumption like it? At any rate, in each of the sociologies investigated, the problematique of identity affecting sociology all over the world has emerged, even if not always so emphatically, with a quality creating discourse as it has done in Hungarian sociology. And it can be easily seen that a series of questions have hit social scientists in a rather similar form and at the same time in the post-socialist countries, such as: Who am I? What am I doing? What is my role towards authority and society and in the international arena of sociology? Though obviously these questions preoccupy almost all the sociologists of the world today, this common East-Central European experience, if there is anything like it, may have offered a proper ground to a study of a more uniform set of approaches that would have made comparison possible on an identical platform. As it is revealed by the Preface, the authors of the volume did not avail themselves of this choice, but it cannot be learned from the individual texts why they did not wish to put directly this question of identity. Though the volume explicitly does not discuss this issue, it gives an answer to it. In the closing paper summarizing the volume, the Editor goes through the specificities found in the different sociological discourses of the region, and attributes them to the consequences of following and utilizing local sociological traditions. It is not only those differences that can be classified under these traditions that had derived from the general situation of the intellectuals in the communisms of the region but also factors such as the multi-centered nature of Poland as against the 'scholarly hydrocephalic' one of Hungary, or the pre-war sociological efforts, or the procrastinated war in Serbia. In the light of these Éva Kovács may categorically state that "the decisive discourses of the five countries under survey follow their own ways. At the same time it also means that though one may speak about the sociology of individual countries, one definitely cannot do so about the sociology of the region" (253).