

The Cognitive Chance of Central European Sociology¹

Anna Wessely

The year in which the bicentenary of the French Revolution was celebrated, produced a series of revolutions of a very different character which promised to exert as profound an influence on our conceptions of history and social evolution as the French Revolution did in the 19th century. The events of that year in (East) Central Europe not only defied the historical materialist notion of social progress and dumbfounded all Kremlinologists, but they also put the predictive capacities of the social sciences, whether within or outside that region, seriously in doubt. Not even the most optimistic oppositional activists involved

in these changes had reckoned with the outcomes produced. This fact indicates that analyses of the Soviet-type societies must have been fundamentally flawed on both sides. Western observers tended to overestimate the socially homogenizing force and pervasive ideological power of the authoritarian regimes of Eastern Europe while underestimating their economic vulnerability; the democratic opposition in these countries tended to overestimate the strength of the communist parties and underestimate their own potential following. The parliamentary elections which concluded these "conservative" revolutions demonstrated the *perseverance of traditional patterns of culture* in spite of the radical social structural transformations in these people's republics where the indoctrination of the population had combined with their depoliticization.

With all due respect to the heroic efforts of oppositional forces in these countries, the major factors precipitating revolutionary change were not of a political nature. The failure of the planning, redistributive economy either to produce or to adapt technological innovation and to develop rational economic behavior on a macro-level set a limit to further growth, led to an increasing dependence on foreign loans and then to indebtedness, involving the socialist countries in an ever deepening crisis. The challenge, or threat even, of being left out of a unified Europe and sinking to the status of the Third World gave an extremely strong impetus to the wish for a radical change. The actual bankruptcy of most socialist states forced their political leaders to adopt a new course of action trying to win popular support for the economic reforms deemed inevitable. They not only failed in that attempt but inadvertently revealed their weakness and gradually

¹ Written in collaboration with György Csepeli and first presented at the "Hungary in the World" congress in Budapest, June 1991.

lost control over the events triggered of by the apparently slight changes they themselves inaugurated (cf. Csepeli and Örkény 1992).

Following upon the euphoric moments of 1989, intellectuals and professionals in the former peoples' republics of Europe set themselves two objectives. Firstly, exploiting the booming interest in post-communist societies, they wished to present their work projects to "the world" in order to demonstrate that these measured up to international standards; secondly, they wanted to explore the ways of "catching up" with the development of Western scholarship. Since the metaphors of "lagging behind" and "catching up" have flooded political discourse on all levels in these countries, it is time to crack their worn surfaces and see what they actually imply. If they merely carry the call to adopt thoughtlessly whatever has become part of the staple diet American sociological journals feed their readers on, then these metaphors invite us to elaborate and proudly conserve our peripheral position in international professional discourse.

In this paper we want to present some of the reasons why we believe that Central European society has fostered a specific approach to the understanding of society, that should not be neglected in our anxious eagerness to be accepted at last as sociologists – without benevolent but restrictive adjectives, used to indicate the exotic flavor of our production. It is but a matter of course that Hungarian sociologists must be familiar with recent trends in sociological theorizing and technics if they want to join in the international professional communication. Yet we also want to suggest that they should insist on the difference of the Hungarian social experience which might enable them to do sociology not just like anybody else but in a way no one else can. Our point is that Hungarian, and Central European, sociologists might have a special contribution to make to the development of social theory. We do not mean some secret lore that merely has to be revealed but a cognitive chance that can be explored or missed.

A journey from the West to the East in Europe has always involved the shocking recognition that in this part of the world, it was possible for an elitistic high culture to enter into a symbiotic relationship with social and cultural backwardness. Thomas Mann probably described his own experience of Hungary in Chapter XXXVI of *Doctor Faustus* where Adrian Leverkühn enjoys the hospitality of a Hungarian aristocratic lady in a mansion with an extensive library in five languages, two concert pianos and other luxuries. The village which belongs to the estates lives, however, "in a state of deepest poverty, preserving an entirely archaic, prerevolutionary stage of life."

The text reveals the operation of a cognitive scheme which classifies people, activities, objects, and situations in reference to their states in "more advanced parts of the world." The inherently evolutionist assumptions of this scheme make the observer expect a culture "correspond" to a given stage of economic and social development. The visitors are puzzled to find their own cultural ideals professed and realized in a completely alien social world. The arising cognitive dissonance will generally be resolved by well-minding suggestions as to how backwardness can be overcome, how the visited country, people, etc. should catch up with the happier nations of the West.

The traveller's perspective is shared by the majority of the natives. The upper strata of their society feel the pressure of international economic competition and thus tacitly encourage intellectuals to devote themselves to the elaboration of various programs of social reform. The challenge of modernization elicits three kinds of response. Traditionalists will insist on existing structures or customs and fight against the modernizers. The

latter are, however, divided among themselves, unable to agree on the strategy of "lifting up" their country. One faction – borrowing the Russian term, let's call them *zapadnik* – tries to introduce as many elements of Western civilization as possible, in order to reproduce Western/modern conditions in their homeland. The other faction asserts the unique value of native culture and suggests catching up with the West by embarking on an alternative route to modernity. Using the Russian term again, we may call them *pochvennik*.

The opposition of these two stances and their ideological programs has been most perceptively described by Norbert Elias in a seemingly academic analysis of the socio-genesis of the German concepts of *Zivilisation* and *Kultur* in the first chapter of his book, *The Civilizing Process*. Here he showed how the term "civilization" expressed for the Western nations their self-confident sense of national identity, while "Kultur," a term invented in Germany but adopted by all Central European peoples, was used to define and assert the identity of nations lacking stable boundaries and the institutions of civil society. Elias claims that the concept of civilization "sums up everything in which Western society of the last two or three centuries believes itself superior to earlier societies or 'more primitive' contemporary ones" (Elias 1978). Germans and, let us add, Central Europeans in general, reject the Anglo-French connotations of the word "civilization." Applied to their societies, this seemingly neutral, descriptive term turns namely immediately into a quantitative and normatively laden standard which reveals their underdevelopment or backwardness and feeds their bitter sense of inferiority. These nations east of the Rhine prefer, therefore, to describe themselves in terms of *Kultur* which reassuringly emphasizes the incomparable traits of their social existence. This value-laden concept of culture will then be opposed to *Zivilisation*, understood as "mere outward appearance," the sum total of the useful but superficial institutional arrangements and customs, or utilitarian, technical devices.

There are several analytical dimensions along which these conceptions can be shown to add up to two distinctive systems of rationality:

Dimension	Civilization	Kultur
time	present-oriented	past-oriented
space	expansion	demarcation
action	goal-oriented	value-oriented
actor	individually responsible	subject to collective fate
social perspective	universal	particular
relation to nature	mastery, submission	submission
mode of appraisal	quantitative	qualitative
object of appraisal	production	single accomplishments
argumentation	procedural	substantive

Immanuel Wallerstein's conception of a world economic system with three distinct regions, i.e., the center, the periphery, and the semiperiphery, suggests a sociological generalization of Elias' conceptual, etymological analysis. The concept of civilization emerges in the center, it is unthinkingly adopted or rejected in the periphery, while the semi-periphery takes pains to define its position versus both poles and does so in terms of the contrast *Zivilisation* – *Kultur*.

With respect to European history, the Hungarian historian Jenő Szűcs proposed a theory of three developmental regions (Szűcs 1988). His description of Central-Eastern Europe fits very well the model of the semi-periphery as proposed by Wallerstein. This region includes, according to Szűcs, the area from the line of the Elbe and Saale to the Baltic Sea and the Carpathian mountains. Since the various ethnic or religious groups in this area had weak or no nation states, they could not find unambiguous props for the construction of their national identities. These nations, even if later successful in establishing their states, had constantly to seek out and draw their boundaries anew, and ask themselves, in a political as well as a social psychological sense, again and again: Who are we? What is our real identity? What is the true German, Hungarian, Czech, Croatian, or Austrian like?

Hegel was right to say that “Nations are what their deeds are.” Actually, a nation with a history of great deeds (in Hegel’s example, the Englishmen “who navigate the ocean, have the commerce of the world, to whom the East Indies belong and their riches, who have a parliament, juries, etc.” [Hegel 1956: 74]) does not have to worry about its national character. It is the peoples in ethnically mixed and backward countries, losing out in international competition and threatened by the expansion of self-confident empires, who are anxious to define and metaphysically enhance their allegedly unique attributes. With no historical deeds to be triumphant about, they will tend to create their self-image from other ingredients, i.e. they will rely on the normative domain of their *Kultur*.

But, at this point, the nations of (East) Central Europe find themselves entangled in a paradoxical state of mind. Their *Kultur* does separate them from the West, but not from each other. They reject quantitative comparison in terms of civilization with the West and insist on their qualitative singularity for the reasons just mentioned. This kind of cultural comparison which combined the elaboration of the difference with a sincere admiration of the achievements of the other has worked smoothly along the North-South axis. The best known examples are, perhaps, the intellectual best-sellers of the 19th and early 20th centuries, filled with speculations on the respective nature and merits of the “Gothic” and the “Mediterranean” spirit. Yet, the same strategy cannot be applied in respect to other Central European neighbors because those allegedly unique cultural traits would soon turn out to be not so unique after all. Nationalist rhetoric reintroduces, therefore, the otherwise despised quantitative standard and endeavors to marshal evidence that the speaker’s country is more advanced, more civilized, nearer to the West than its neighbors. The operation has certainly many pitfalls. While theoretically nonsensical, it has become a persistent element of practice. Most Central European intellectual and artistic achievements, allegedly spontaneous manifestations of the national culture, have to find Western approval first in order to secure themselves lasting success in their country of origin or to be noticed at all in the neighbor countries. Thus, for instance, the myth of fanciful and intellectually provoking, fin-de-siècle Habsburg Central Europe had to be created by Western historians for Austrians, Croatians, Hungarians, and Czechs to recognize and embrace this flattering *common* image of themselves.

Very slowly, Central Europeans have begun to recognize that it is precisely the similarity of their historical and social experiences – their precarious, intermediate position between East and West, the secular coexistence of various ethnic, religious, and linguistic communities on the territories of belatedly evolved nation states with insecure boundaries and artificially rigid social structures – that produced the specific features of their culture.

One salient feature of this culture is probably an outcome of the particular form modernization has taken in this region. It has been a one-sided and state-controlled process of modernization, unaccompanied by the development of civil society. Within the preserved rigid social structure, urbanization, greater social, geographical, and occupational mobility did not create a melting pot for the previously isolated communities. Rather these rapid changes made many members of these societies experience certain aspects of the position and role expectations associated with the type of social relationship described as the *stranger* by Georg Simmel. Since occupational roles were insufficiently differentiated from social statuses and their prescribed codes of behavior, individual mobility entailed discontinuity with the former self, a sense of loss and alienation. Orientation in the newly emerging social settings, unfamiliar to almost all participants, required a creative combination of an empathic understanding of the other as different, shrewd calculation of the advantages one’s own cultural baggage could secure, and participation in a fake consensus on the superiority of traditionally defined forms of unequal interaction to its neutral, legally or organizationally prescribed forms.

The experience of cultural heterogeneity and conflict, the simultaneousness of the inside and the outside views have reduced the stock of taken for granted elements within the social environment. It required constant alertness, it made people conceive of every interaction as a situation of stress demanding special techniques of coping. These included the dogging of issues, mutual efforts to preserve the appearance of mutual agreement as well as attempts to find and elaborate the “common denominator,” to mediate between conflicting interests by evoking their possible synthesis. These latter attempts were guided not so much by a rational belief in the possibility of rational conflict solving as rather by the idea that on a certain, deep or high, level, conflicts could be shown to be either mere misunderstandings or parts of an overarching unity. This kind of therapeutic intent is clearly present in those “languages of translation” Central European thinkers have proposed for overcoming the barriers to the understanding of the self and the other. What we have in mind here is Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge, Freud’s psychoanalysis, and Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language games.

It is no accident that these influential theories had originated in Central Europe but found success in the West. Their suggested solutions – to overcome misunderstanding, to achieve individual autonomy by way of enlightened insight – could not be institutionalized in Central Europe. They could, however, be exported to the West and revolutionize whole realms of accepted knowledge. In the course of their reception, these theories with a therapeutic intent have, however, undergone radical change. Their efforts to present a global vision, to provide a description which shows how mutually exclusive assertions represented elements of one and the same context, could not be assimilated into the rational operation of normal science, could not be fitted into the system of the academic division of labor. These “languages of translation” have become accepted and institutionalized as rational, scholarly, formalized ways of speaking where “it is less important to do full justice to each case in its absolute uniqueness than to be able more and more correctly to classify and subsume each case under pre-established categories” (Mannheim 1936: 305). This scholarly discourse is no more oriented toward the Central European desire to express socially coded individual differences. “Rather the neutralizations of the qualitative differences in the varying points of view, arising in certain definite situations, result in a scheme of orientation which allows only certain formal and

structural components of the phenomena to emerge into the foreground of experience and thought" (Mannheim 1936: 304). As a consequence, Freudian psychoanalysis has become medicalized; Mannheim's program for the sociology of knowledge, originally designed to become the integrative framework for the various elements of knowledge gathered in the humanities and the social sciences, has been reduced to narrowly defined inquiries within a subfield of sociology; and Wittgenstein has been admired as "the technical philosopher of 'truth tables' and 'language games'," whose theses in the concluding section of the *Tractatus* "about solipsism, death and 'the sense of the world' which 'must lie outside the world'" should be dismissed as casual afterthoughts with no binding force (Janik and Toulmin 1973: 22-23). In this adapted form, the imported theories had a fermenting affect, serving the purpose of making conflicts transparent and manageable.

The reception of Freud, Mannheim, or Wittgenstein in the West was systematically blind to the ethical aspects of their theories, to their distrust of formalization and operationalization, their insistence that conflicts were not merely problems to be solved, difficulties to be overcome, but represented an authentic form of existence on a pre-theoretical level. This pre-theoretical level is pointed to by the indefinable terms denoting the socially coded forms of individual consciousness: *Weltanschauung*, *Lebensform*, *Unbehagen*. Scholarly complaints about the lack of analytical distinctions and discipline in the way these terms are used, about the habit of Freud, Mannheim, and Wittgenstein to offer examples instead of producing empirical generalizations and/or logical deductions, indicate why it has been impossible to fit their theories into the institutionalized frameworks of knowledge.

A similarly motivated refusal to follow the rules of academic sociological description characterizes the tradition of sociography in many Central European countries, especially Poland, Hungary, and Romania. The authors combined in themselves the interests and methods of poets and politicians, social philosophers and journalists, reformers and researchers. They thought of themselves as parts of an important social movement within contemporary society. Several decades after the first publication, their works are still capable of eliciting public debates. Curiously enough, a leading Hungarian Communist ideologist, József Révai has produced the most fitting description of this sociographic movement. He claimed that it had been able to throw light on the fundamental problems of Hungarian society, which arid, scientific descriptions could never grasp. The necessity and impossibility of a normal, i.e., Western form of peasant embourgeoisement in these countries could be adequately expressed only in the metaphorical language of these sociographers who spoke of sickly processes, half-hearted and awkward embourgeoisement, silent revolution, escape (Révai 1955: 300-303).

These metaphors were, and still are, rooted in the prevailing undifferentiated form of social discourse which mixes types of discourse that would, in other parts of the world, constitute the separate genres and appropriate languages of poetry, fictional narrative, social science, politically agitating pamphlets, or meditative essays.

Not only the discourse was undifferentiated, but the roles of the participants as well. This is a historically evolved role, the role of the *intellectual*, obligatory for all who wish to join in the discourse. Anyone preferring a professional role to this traditionally defined image of the intellectual was perceived as an outsider whose concerns were different from those of the society. Intellectual activity thus could not emancipate

itself from the dominant form of political discourse. Overt or covert censorship from all sides hedged in public discourse and suggested that all utterances possessed an almost magic force, capable of evoking and realizing the referents of the words used. Moreover, the undifferentiated state of the public domain entailed the dependence of intellectuals on the various political and economic powers that be. This forced them to reckon with many, often inconsistent expectations which could only be met by exploiting the systematic ambiguity of a language of images. This was clearly a trap from which there was but one way of escape: to preserve personal integrity by reducing every topic of discourse onto an ethical plane and find the public's approval by producing aesthetically gratifying texts. The result was a form of scholarship confined to the domain of national *Kultur*.

Yet, this archaic kind of sociology, torn between its *pochvennik* and *zapadnik* poles and unable to supersede their conflict, seems to have retained much of its former significance. Firstly, its lasting impact on our culture serves as a reminder that if sociology is to retain or regain its public relevance, it cannot confine itself to the study of professionally defined problems. Secondly, it offers a literary and, therefore, highly flexible language suited to the description of non-Western type societies and social attitudes. This language moves freely between different stylistic registers and allows the combination of a personal tone and interpretive approach with an effort to produce a possibly objective, analytical description of social phenomena. It suggests itself as a language of mediation between conceptual frameworks and lived experience as well as between structurally different types of social experience. It is this third aspect which links this form of social inquiry to the intellectual efforts of a Wittgenstein, Freud, or Mannheim.

Can this tradition be deconstructed? Would that yield anything but the image of a national inferiority complex deflated to its proper size? We suggest that the attitude which had arisen in the Central European context and gave life to the theoretical projects of a Freud, Mannheim or Wittgenstein as well as to the literary prose of the sociographers should be developed and cultivated. It may usefully serve as a constant reminder that it might be impossible to express the failure of the modern project, the dialectic of rationalization in the language of any single, differentiated intellectual sphere, in the analytical language of description its scholarly standards prescribe.

And, finally, let us indicate the link between this attitude and the cognitive chance of Central European sociology, referred to in the title of our paper. Figuratively speaking Central Europe had been *almost* Western ever since the Middle Ages and became *almost* Eastern after the second war. Squeezed in between two threatening and sociopolitically very different regions, it has always been forced to understand both in order to survive. Now, with the recently begun transition to democracy, Central Europe is drifting again toward the West. The most valuable asset in its baggage is its cultural capacity of combining the Eastern and the Western European perspectives in its approach both to Western and to Eastern type societies. It may happen that Central Europeans throw away this asset in their vain hope of thus hastening their assimilation to the desired union with "Europe." Mythical narratives of our purely Western substance having been stained and distorted by evil Eastern influence have started proliferating already. Let us hope that they will not grow powerful enough to rob us of our cognitive chance, envisioned by the great Central European thinkers of this century: to carry out the job of translation between the two parts of this continent.

EPILOGUE FROM 1992

A full year has passed since we wrote this essay. What seemed then a realistic chance has proved to be a missed chance, if not an outright illusion from the very start. Then we suggested that the Central European contribution could broaden the scope of the post-modern sociological discourse. History has played a dirty trick on us, again. At present, we find ourselves in a backward-looking world that pathetically tries to breathe life into the figures of speech used by a half a century-old rhetoric of *Kultur*.

The seeming inadequacy of our examples, taken from the 1920s and 30s or even earlier, to illustrate a cognitive attitude that we still suppose to be present in contemporary Central Europe, needs some explanation. We had no intention to suggest the continuity of a specific tradition that, having been forced underground, could appear now in full light and bear fruits comparable in significance to the works of Freud, Mannheim, or Wittgenstein. Their examples were used, rather, to illustrate a specific and recurrent social position with its attitudinal, motivational and cognitive implications, i.e., that of the stranger, or involved outsider.

Citing precisely these authors had another reason. Eric Hobsbawm has recently suggested that any talk of Central Europe, or Central European culture, is mere illusion-hunting nowadays, for that culture used to be that of German-speaking Jews, which vanished together with their carriers in the crematoria of Auschwitz (Hobsbawm 1991). Against this view would claim that neither was that culture merely Jewish, nor without a lasting impact on the national cultures of Central Europe.

One of the persistent features of that culture was the social problem-oriented pursuit of social science which did not let a discipline prescribe it the problems and acceptable methods of research, but attempted to respond to the challenges that reached it from the social environment. The decades since the mid-60s have produced a particular variant of this tradition. The repression of autonomous political attitudes and cultural orientations has elicited, as a response, a necessarily interdisciplinary form of social science discourse where scholars tended to attend more closely to the new insights won in other fields than to the accumulated results of their established disciplines. The forbidden competition of schools and trends within one branch of scholarship has been, in a way, replaced by the competition or plurality of alternative scientific object constructions. The mastering of social problems has been, for the last 50 to 60 years, at least in Hungary, the exclusive reserve of government politics and the kind of positivistic, social technology it favored, in which citizens, however appreciate by the public, have no say. Independent scholarly effort has been focussed, therefore, on producing alternative definitions of the social problems. All invention has been poured into the definition of the problems themselves, and, frequently, research more or less stopped as soon as this was accomplished.

All this goes a long way to explain the curious sterility of post-1989 social science in the former European people's republics. The funds for positivist research have been seriously cut and what is still being done and published shockingly lacks social or political relevance. Alternative perspectives have never had access to research opportunities and now, when they could finally test their hypotheses, most of their representatives have gone into politics and now find themselves confronted with the petrified oppositions they formerly tried to overcome.

The cognitive chance outlined in our paper seems, by now, missed for these countries. If the present trends continue, a new wave of immigrants from Central Europe may again enrich Western social science without, however, having been able to facilitate a solution to the social problems they had set out to understand. Or, to be even more pessimistic, whatever used to be specifically Central European thinking, might disappear without a trace. Right now it seems that in understanding our own present problems we have stopped to look at and reflect on ourselves and prefer to take over the perspective of all those "transitologists" (busying themselves with issues of the "transition to democracy") who have succeeded in turning us from the subjects into the objects of social research.

REFERENCES CITED

- Csepeli, György and Antal Örkény (1992): *Ideology and Political Beliefs in Hungary. The Twilight of State Socialism*. London: Pinter Publishers.
- Elias, Norbert (1978): *The Civilizing Process*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Freidrich (1956): *The Philosophy of History*. New York.
- Hobsbawm, Eric (1991): "Austria and Central Europe." In *Lettre Internationale*, Hungarian edition, 3:1-3.
- Janik, Allan and Stephen Toulmin (1973): *Wittgenstein's Vienna*. Trowbridge: Redwood Press.
- Mannheim, Karl (1936): *Ideology and Utopia*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich.
- Révai, József (1955): *Marxizmus, népiesség, magyarság*. Budapest: Kossuth.
- Szűcs, Jenő (1988 [1981]): "Three Historical Regions of Europe. An Outline." In *Civil Society and the State*, John Keane ed., pp291-332. London and New York: Verso.