

## The Split Sociological Mind in East-European Societies

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Comments on György  
Lengyel's article

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### SOCIOLOGY AND PUBLICITY

In the decades of the Kádár era, Hungarian sociology had a peculiar place in Hungarian intellectual culture. For reasons I cannot embark on in detail here, it became the language of transmission for various groups of intellectuals; physicians, teachers, engineers, public educators, editors, etc. who used the terminology of sociology in public discourse. This situation did not leave sociology itself untouched. Its practitioners presented their writings not only to a narrow circle of professionals but also to the wider public, and hence refrained from using a specific language understood only by the professional group. As a consequence, no idiom for publicizing the science developed, as experts al-

ready used the same language with lay persons as they used among themselves. Anyone chancing by a Hungarian sociological conference in the seventies or early eighties would have had no difficulty understanding the proceedings. When there appeared a study or two whose language and argumentation were restricted to a narrow scientific area, their readings or interpretations by the intellectual public extended the implications far beyond the borders of the discipline. Thus, the few economic sociological works that were produced were quick to become topics of intellectual discourse and immediately transcended their disciplinary context, their specific expressions assuming a metaphorical meaning.

This peculiar situation of sociology resulted in scientific achievements being identically evaluated by the profession and the public. Our discipline also had its professors Öveges and Lőrincze, champions of popularizing the respective achievements of physics and linguistics in Hungary, but unlike in the latter case, the lay public's approval of the sociologists, won by their public appearances, usually accompanied with their prestige on the scientific stage.

This situation of sociology heavily hindered professionalization. As professionalization entailed the risk of decreased prestige in the broad intellectual community, sociologists tried to avoid it. That is one explanation for György Lengyel's statement that Hungarian (economic) sociology is problem-oriented. The topics chosen for investigation by its exponents were not picked from among the unsettled internal problems of the disci-

pline but occupied the entire intellectual community or were potentially interesting for it. This is its weakness, the low level of professionalization, and this is possibly its strength: its sensitivity to raise questions of interest to the whole intellectual community.

## ECONOMIC SOCIOLOGY AND THE OFFICIAL IDEOLOGY

Official ideology fundamentally influenced the construction of sociology in Eastern Europe. As this subject has far-reaching implications, let me pick a question specifically concerning Hungarian (and East European) economic sociology. The official ideology largely contributed to the emergence of a conservative variant of economic sociology in Hungary.

From the early and mid-'80s, a new approach emerged in Western economic sociology: in new interpretations the actors of the economy were put back into the social medium, network of trust, set of relations, from where microeconomic abstraction removed them earlier. The vogue of approaches labelled by the catchwords of *the theory of embeddedness, network, industrial district, milieu*, etc. began, and lasts to this day. By contrast, Hungarian economic sociology remained in the terrain of classical microeconomy. Underlying this is the fact that at its core, the official ideology was the negation of classical microeconomy (the central element of its theory being the individual believing in the superiority of collective goals and submitting himself voluntarily to them). Consequently, its representatives in economic sociology confronted this with the concept of man in microeconomy (rational individual asserting his own interest first and foremost). It would have weakened the bargaining position of economic sociology if it had confronted the collective man of the official ideology with another "communal" economic actor (harmonizing his individual interests with those of a smaller or larger group organized on ethnic, confidential, etc. grounds).

## THE DUALITY OF SOCIETY

György Lengyel mentions two classic authors of Hungarian pre-socialist economic sociology, Ferenc Erdei and Lajos Leopold, whose contributions were outstanding by western standards as well. The outlook of both were determined by modernity, or its typically East European interpretation. To paraphrase Marx: the political set-up, economy, social structure of advanced West European societies is the key to understanding the Hungarian situation. The application of the idea of modernity to Eastern Europe had a peculiar result: in both Leopold's and Erdei's works, Hungarian society emerged lopsided, transitional, even distorted, laden with undesirable mutations. The phenomena encountered here are chaotic and unintelligible by themselves, only the perspective of progress endows them with meaning. Leopold uses the expression of simulated capitalism: the formal, legal frames of capitalism are western, their contents are eastern. Thus, his concept of society is lopsided, consisting of traditional elements in an advanced legal frame. The complex of traditional and modern elements is made quite explicit in Erdei's work: in his representation, Hungarian society is split, having one foot in the past, the other in the future, that is, half of society is feudal, the other half is bourgeois.

Leopold and Erdei scrutinize society as a biologist looks at an embryo. An embryo has no specificity, or identity: its existence is mere transition, some of its organs and forms of appearance belong to the past, others to the future. It has no present, no self-contained, self-sufficient structure, its features do not refer to itself but to the past or future.

This pre-World War II approach had a strong influence on social scientific thought revived in the seventies. Erdei's vision of the dual society was published in the second half of the '70s by *Valóság*, with substantial influence on historians, sociologists. Amidst the circumstances of socialism, however, the central characteristic of pre-war sociological thought, "retrospective" interpretation, underwent a peculiar metamorphosis. In a socialism believed to be unchangeable, the bourgeois future, as the evident starting point for the understanding of the present in both Leopold's and Erdei's argumentation, lost sense. The idea of a split society remained, without the time perspective. Jenő Szűcs, reaching back to István Hajnal's ideas, interpreted the conception of Hungary's backwardness in spatial, geographical terms. Jenő Szűcs spun on the East-West opposition playing such a crucial role in the political thinking of Hungarian intellectuals. It is, however, noteworthy that the term West in this interpretation no longer signifies the future, since nobody could believe at that time that the Hungarian society of the seventies and eighties was progressing in the direction indicated by the West. The temporal character of the theory of progress was metamorphosed into a spatial metaphor, replacing the past-future antithesis by the east-west pair. As a result of banishing the perspective of future from the interpretation of society, historians, and sociologists went on with the tradition begun by pre-war social science and continued to conceive of the Hungarian society as transitory, lopsided, this time, however, considering these specificities of reality as final, predestined, inevitable, unalterable. The society of the present was no longer seen as an embryo but as a freakish society in which regressive eastern and progressive western elements were finally solidified and integrated in one body.

Thus East European sociology had to refrain from one of the most elementary interpretative procedures of the ideal of modernity: from conceiving of social phenomena with the help of arranging them along a track of development, since, as noted above, future was eliminated from thinking. Hence the fundamentally temporal character of development became replaced by a spatial, geographical interpretation of facts. As a result, a peculiar geographical game emerged in the Hungarian intellectual discourse possibly boggling western minds in which the region including Hungary was now a bit to the east, now a bit to the west in the imaginary map, depending on the given interpretation. According to localizations as a function of interpretation, our country was subsumed under four regions: Eastern Europe, East-Central Europe, Central Eastern Europe and Central Europe. It is not hard to realize the metaphorical character of the geographical location, since these designations never denoted the actual situation of a country in a map – what is more, they never really referred to the concept of country as a geographic and political entity enclosed by borders, but to the society. What they regarded as East European or East Central European was not Hungary but Hungarian society.

Hungarian economic sociology was also powerfully influenced by the concept of the dual society. Its analogy is the idea that economic processes are governed jointly by the eastern (bureaucratic coordination) and western (market) principles. At the same time, using the metaphor of schizophrenia, István R. Gábor further radicalized the concept of the dual society. A schizophrenic economy does not mean the indifferent coexistence of

the eastern and western elements as in Erdei's reasoning, nor does it mean the replacement of the time perspective with a spatial approach, as in Szücs's works. It suggests two economic practices that mutually presuppose and at the same time continuously mar one another, being governed by antithetical principles. Neither the eastern, nor the western principle can be excluded from economy since they both construct and destroy each other and hence the economy's state is schizophrenic. This metaphor signifies the economic arrangement of the overripe socialism of the early '80s which was no longer merely cracked but widely split by the contradictions of the system. (As is known, the theory of the second economy was quickly expanded to cover the whole of society. According to this approach, not only the sphere of economy, but the entire society was suffering from schizophrenia.)

## THE SCHIZOPHRENIA OF SOCIOLOGY

The postulation of the Hungarian society and economy as schizoid inevitably entailed the schizophrenia of sociology as well. One of the most crucial methodological questions to be answered by sociologists was whether the set of concepts, theories, methodologies elaborated by western sociology for the interpretation of advanced bourgeois societies could be used for the understanding and description of backward, lopsidedly developed Hungarian society. If we described Hungarian society in professional terms (adjusted to the western scientific value system and using its set of concepts and procedures of verification), would we not get a constructed society? An object that followed from our concepts and not the one that was to be described? On the other side, if Hungarian sociology did not make use of the achievements of western social science, it would inevitably become unscientific, only producing partial findings. A paradoxical situation arose in which the more professionalized sociology became, the less it was able to tackle our world considered to be *the reality*, that is transitional and lopsided, in the Hungarian intellectual discourse.

The following dilemma further aggravated the schizophrenia of Hungarian sociology and its practitioners. When they refused to apply the conceptual stock and theories of western social sciences, resigning from scientific rigour in the strict sense in order to be able to more authentically grasp Hungarian reality, they bumped into the problem that the reality to be interpreted seemed transitional, lacking identity or self-defining internal structural specificities, in keeping with the traditional mentality of Hungarian social science. It seemed to be a world which could not be understood in itself, except in comparison with the peculiarities of other societies. This led back to the problem of professionalization, since the need for comparison was conditional upon the knowledge and application of western society and sociology, and that, in turn, was also a trap, the trap of construction.

In a study by Csepeli et al. (see in this volume) the authors assert that the practitioners of eastern social sciences are incapable of communication since the construct of their world and their modes of social expression are different from their western counterparts. It follows from the aforementioned that the adoption of the outlook of modernity which basically influenced the problem of perception of Hungarian sociology already before the World War II, produced an approach according to which Hungarian society

was a transitional formation not comprehensible in itself. As has been seen above, however, a society thus postulated cannot be discussed in the terms of western social science, since this results in a constructed society. This explains why "intellectuals in the East are proud of being confused and obscure, and tend to despise clarity and rationality of composition." (p. 119)

Returning to György Lengyel's essential differentiation between problem-oriented East European and paradigm-oriented West European sociology, it seems to be explainable in the light of what was proposed above. Paradigms can only be formulated in relation to a society that is regarded as model-like by the sociological community. Hungarian sociologists, however, did not perceive their reality as typical or model-like, as a result of several decades of Hungarian social scientific thinking. A lopsided, transitional society lacking identity cannot be paradigmatically interpreted. East European sociology is problem-oriented, tied far more closely to the literary patterns of this region than to western scientific models.

Pondering the past and present state of East European sociology, one is forced to ask the vital question of whether we will be able to transcend our problems of approach and methodology in such a way that we will not lose our identity. In other words: how to get out of the above-sketched trap? How to grasp and describe Eastern Europe within Eastern Europe in such a way that the description may carry scientific value for American sociologists as well? It is the most far-reaching aspect of György Lengyel's writing that it has gone beyond the framework of a mentality which would logically follow from the East European social scientific tradition. He does not speak of western economic sociology as a scientific ideal compared to which East European social science appears inevitably blurred, irrational, stymied at a lower grade of development. Lengyel analyzes unbiassed the scientific advantages and the deficiencies of both the paradigm-oriented and the problem-oriented approaches without putting either one before the other.

He declares a complementary otherness which does not imply a superior or inferior quality in itself. Of course, if Csepeli et al. are right in claiming that western sociologists are only interested in acquiring raw material in our region which they wish to elaborate with their own scientific technology, then our situation is hopeless. Hopeless because we would search in vain for a way out in the direction of post-modernism as Csepeli et al. recommend, if better-trained western sociologists, hence also more up-to-date in post-modernism, continued to see us in the East as backward in terms of the old, time-tested mentality of modernity, and hence as inferior, mere deliverer of raw materials. We could hardly go on promoting our different, problem-oriented science under the aegis of otherness, if the post-modern powers were interpreting it as backwardness.