Whose Social Science Is Colonized?

Response to "AIDS in Social Science in Eastern Europe"

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As American anthropologists with research experience in Eastern Europe (with Russian, Romani, and Czech/Slovak cultures respectively), we feel compelled to respond to the present essay. We share the authors' concerns for the pressing problems which plague academic research in countries of the former Eastern Bloc: a lack of opportunities for funding, publishing and well-paid work, both in proportion to standards they were accustomed to under socialism, and in comparison with some Western scholars. In the context of developing inequalities of access to international forums, East European academics are right to worry that their own interpretations and analyses may not be equally heard abroad.

However, the authors' discussion is pitched at a level so general and abstract that the argument is robbed of much persuasive value it might otherwise have had. Rather than providing examples to support their claims, the authors make sweeping generalizations and rely upon the catchy yet inaccurate (not to mention tasteless) metaphors of "AIDS" and "colonialism" to make their points. If the issue here is how to address inequalities of work and funding, the analysis might have trod another, more profitable path, one that would outline structural reasons for these inequalities in the context of specific political relations and decisions. As it is, the essay reads as a bitter condemnation of scholars "less native" than the authors, but without identifying any researcher, projects, or works in particular.

According to its authors, the essay intends to "characterize some typical response strategies to the attempts of colonization as they have developed among social scientists in the individual Eastern and Central European countries which unwillingly had to realize their new 'liberated' status" (p. 114). However, throughout the entire essay they make only one brief mention of one East European country (Hungary), leaving the reader with little material to work with. Surely it would be a mistake to suggest that the state of academia in all of the former East bloc is the same as in Hungary?

Furthermore, the level of generalization and tone of writing have resulted in numerous contradictions. Here we highlight some areas where we feel that generalization and "shock value" were privileged over accuracy, and thus hope to contribute fruitfully to a dialogue about academic relations and conditions in which we and our Eastern and West-

ern colleagues alike have substantial personal and professional investments. Although the following comments reflect our experiences as Americans and with American academic and granting institutions (for anthropological research in particular), they may also have relevance to institutions in other Western countries.

Let us begin first with the presence of Western researchers in Eastern Europe. The authors depict a rush for data following the sociopolitical transformations of 1989, an event which Western researchers "failed to predict" (p. 113).[1] The authors then note a dramatic shift in the interests of Western funding agencies and of the researchers who depend upon them for financial support. These comments raise several questions. For example, why do the authors criticize foreign researchers for making "quick changes" to study topics such as ethnic conflict and privatization, when they themselves begin the essay with the phrase, "following the fast and unexpected collapse of state-socialist systems"? Is it not to be expected that the aims and interests of social science research, no matter where based, would change following drastic transformations in social and political worlds? Similarly, they criticize Western scholars and those influenced by them for "importing" interest in topics such as gender and multiculturalism. However, they write themselves of "some syndromes of the East European experience . . . right-wing extremism . . . disrespect of citizenship rights, xenophobia, and many other forms of social pathology which have been characterized so aptly by István Bibó as early as 1946 . . ." (p. 122). It seems to us that "multiculturalism" and other deconstructions of power relations dovetail with sincere concerns about xenophobia and right wing-extremism. All these assertions seem even more ironic given that the authors conclude the essay with expectations for great developments in East European social sciences because this is a time of what they too call a large-scale "transition."

Our second comment addresses the relationship between Eastern and Western researchers. The authors portray the Western researcher as having little or no language proficiency, enlisting local academics to carry out research which they then take back to the West, without acknowledging either this assistance or the cultural translation which accompanied the linguistic one (p. 116–117). However, in the first place, nearly all of the American agencies supporting social science research abroad, including IREX and Fulbright, require proficiency in the language of research and oftentimes prior experience in the host country, in both Eastern Europe and elsewhere. Of course, standards of qualifications for various social science disciplines differ greatly. This said, we would like to ask which type of social science research and researchers are the authors referring to? The authors describe research procedures involving statistical models, suggesting some kind of comparative, quantitative sociology; yet, they only mention anthropology by name (in the context of the threat that nations are reduced to "objects of anthropological study," a citation from Dostoevsky, by the way). This seems odd, since the methods of social and cultural anthropology (knowledge of language, long-term residence in host country, more emphasis on interpretive rather than statistical methods, and hopefully, sensitivity to native subjectivities) are not those the authors criticize.

[1] Predictability is one of the criteria beloved of "rational big science," and it seems odd that the authors would attack Western researchers on these grounds. We are more surprised that the authors do not mention those researchers who were working in the region well before 1989, and who produced detailed studies that are still respected as descriptively and specifically sound. As anthropologists, of course, we do not share any infatuation with predictability imputed to "Western big science."

The authors direct their criticism at Western social scientists in general, making no distinction between professions considerably different in motives, methods, and powers. They include, ostensibly in the same category, social scientists affiliated with universities engaged in independent research, with those employed by for-profit publishing and statistical information companies, as well as those employed by the World Bank and other governmental or privately funded programs such as TEMPUS and Soros. Not all of these groups have direct power to judge whether their East European colleagues are "worthy" of funding, nor all could rightly be criticized for having the missionary mentality of a "Project Democracy." As for the use and misuse of data, we agree that funding agencies should pay more attention to building up research infrastructures in the East rather than allocating funds to pay for Eastern assistants. However, concerning the practices of Western researchers' themselves, their work often draws attention to, in fact advertises, their colleagues' work by naming them in bibliographies. Upon reading an article in a major academic journal, such as *American Ethnologist*, or an academic book on an East European society, one immediately notes numerous citations of local scholars in local languages. This is how American researchers conventionally acknowledge their colleagues' influence, whether critically or charitably. Readers can trace webs of influence and indebtedness (which may be too numerous for individual mention in the preface) through such citations. When scholars feel that their data or their ideas are used without due credit (in the text or the footnotes), it is their responsibility to bring the matter to light and name the offenders.

Above all, however, we must take issue with the depictions and categories of academics and academia, both Eastern and Western. The authors write that Eastern researchers are unable to work well together because of a "historical legacy of suspicion and distrust" (p. 115), yet several pages later they write, "with many years of intense exchanges in closed intellectual circles, Eastern intellectuals have learned to speak in a kind of code with each other . . . years of living together without opportunities for frequent travel have created a sense of intense and immediate community within groups of intellectuals in the East" (p. 120). This contradiction raises several questions. Was there a coherent community of East European intellectuals, or were there boundaries and divisions within this community? Were not some of these scholars more conversant with foreigners of a certain stripe than with co-patriots whom they distrusted? Are these boundaries and divisions not relevant today? Do they not bear upon the allocation of limited funding and academic positions? The authors note these divisions in order to criticize Westerners who seem "insensitive" to them (but who may actually observe more about them than they feel comfortable asking about, precisely because they are guests), but then disregard these divisions in favor of generalizations that support their argument.

For instance, the assertion that, "intellectuals in the East are proud of being confused and obscure," is disconcerting: we would like to hear from other East European intellectuals about this.[2] By way of contrast, the authors characterize Western academia as driven by rationalization ("the name of the virus: rationalization," p. 119). Our own impression is that vagueness and obscurity is just as common in the West, and that precise and

[2] Gal (1991: 453) for one, argues against ideologies that the Hungarian language or state socialist discourses are "indirect," opposed to the "transparency" of American English or the language of capitalism.

"transparent" writing is not difficult to find in the East. Moreover, they equate rationality with the prevalence of postmodernity – which, in fact, methodologically resists "rationality," as do self-defined postmodern scholars. Besides being contradictory, they thus conflate all of Western socials scientists together, without considering that there are many among us who are disturbed by comparative, statistical studies that fail to account for cultural specificity.

Moving on to terrain more familiar to us, the overgeneralized portrait of comfortable Western intellectuals does not match the lifestyle of the majority of professional academics. For instance, many academics in the United States live lives quite similar to those of the Eastern academics depicted in the essay. The statement that Western intellectuals have objectively more free time to write is insupportable. For one, many do not have tenured positions and thus must teach as "visiting" or "adjunct" professors at several colleges or universities part time. Although they must bear the responsibilities of full professors, they receive a fraction of the salary of tenured professors, often without health insurance or other benefits. This, all while trying to stay competitive by publishing. This is, in fact, a growing trend in American academia. Those who do land tenure-track jobs must take on administrative and committee duties in addition to teaching courses, holding office hours and consulting many students. What little time they have left for writing must be shared with time to attend to family matters, if they are lucky enough to have a family at all after moving from city to city, and often from coast to coast, each year in search of a tenure-track position. In fact, some Western intellectuals have actually envy what they perceive to be the free time that their Eastern colleagues have to maintain personal networks and relationships – more of them seem to be able to have families, and to work nearby their friends! Those Western researchers whom the authors witnessed while on grants having excess free time for research were among a lucky few.

Indeed, the American researchers in Eastern Europe whom the above authors have encountered belong to a small minority who manage to get research funding at all, a fraction of applicants each year. In the past few years, state funding for social science research in Central and Eastern Europe has actually been cut across the board (not only for non-US researchers), along with funding for institutions such as Radio Free Europe (which employed a large number of both Westerners and Eastern Europeans). This will only continue in the future. We ourselves would like to know where is this "tremendous amount" of research money going? By contrast, most non-state funded granting institutions that anthropologists rely on (Wenner-Gren, MacArthur, SSRC, Soros) as well as state-funded Fulbright remain open to non-US citizens. While IREX may have cut funding for East European citizens (along with funding of grants for American citizens), other agencies continue to bring East European academics to the United States.

And finally, we think that the boundary dividing the "Eastern" and "Western" social science research is too fluid and porous to withstand the authors' strict, categorical divisions. A great number of leading "Western" academics are "East European," and from various generations (the late Ernest Gellner, Bronislaw Malinowski, Ladislav Holy, Frantisek Svejkovsky, Roman Jakobson, Susal Gal, Svetlana Boym, Agnes Heller, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Zygmunt Bauman, to name a few). Many of these people were trained at Eastern universities and in turn trained many scholars in the West, some even dominating entire schools (such as Malinowski's reign over British social anthropology, or Jakobson's over linguistics at Harvard). In addition to holding positions at major universities in the United States and Britain and publishing in major journals and for major academic presses, they also sit on grant boards allocating funding for research in Eastern Europe and beyond. While many East European academics in the West severed ties with their Eastern colleagues, many others did not, and in fact maintained close connections with persons and institutions.

This point is further supported by the ambiguous national identity of research institutions and grant agencies. Is George Soros, one of the largest sponsors of funding for academic research in the former East Bloc, "Eastern" or "Western"? Are the numerous foundations he has endowed "Eastern" or "Western"? Is the Central European University "Eastern" or "Western" (note that Western students pay high tuition there, while Eastern students at CEU are subsidized or fully paid)?[3]

In conclusion, we have written this lengthy response because we believe that several of the issues raised in the above article are of pressing concern to both Eastern and Western researchers. Our aim has been to add depth to some of these issues by raising questions and identifying areas of over-generalization and inaccuracy, again from the perspective of American anthropologists. While we have taken the authors to task on several accounts, we do not mean to dismiss their criticisms or end this dialogue. Rather, we only wish to suggest that this issue demands more focused analysis and criticism, as exemplified in a recent book review by Ignác Romsics (Romsics 1995; see also Tucker 1995). We feel that critics should judge Westerners' work for its substance and depth, and not for the impression that we are not native enough.

References Cited

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Romsics, Ignác (1995): "Under American Eyes: Interpretations of the Political Transition in Eastern Europe." In *Budapest Review of Books*, 5(1): 11-21.

Tucker, Aviezer (1995): Corruption and Greed: Academic Aid to Eastern Europe." In *Telos*, 102: 149-158.

[3] We have not even begun to list the Eastern authors whose thinking has immeasurably influenced American social science. We do read the work of Easterners – both in translation and in the original. Just to name a few of the more stellar writers translated that have "infected" (excuse the metaphor) our minds from overseas: Mikhail Bakhtin, Vaclav Havel, George Lukács. Beyond these, some of us know and can recite Eastern fiction and poetry better than our own in English (George Konrád, Czeslaw Milosz, Mandelshtam, Bohumil Hrabal). In the arts, in theater alone, the West has followed the teachings of Constantine Stanislavskii, Jerzy Grotowski . . . – but we should end here.