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Fortress, Colony or Interpreter? Reviewing Our Peers

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Who are we? What have we been doing?

These questions may refer to all kinds of group identities, whether national, generational or professional. The main issue that we addressed in the call for this second, thematic issue of *Intersections* was to interrogate the historical and academic specificity of the Eastern (East-Central or Central) European region. What renders the region specific and what kind of knowledge needs to be produced in order to grasp this specificity without falling into the trap of universalism or parochialism? What has been the role of the region's intellectuals and how has this role been transformed since the collapse of state socialism? In other words, we asked questions and demanded confessions about our own professional identity and academic achievements in the context of the social sciences in the East-Central European periphery, and in an environment characterized by a largely unequal distribution of funding and academic career opportunities.

Inspired by two essential but controversial articles, written in 1991 and 1996 respectively, we urged our authors to re-open the discussion about academic relations and knowledge transfer between East and West in order to test whether or not the seemingly very heterogeneous scientific products of the region can bring about some sort of local way of looking at things and people, and whether or not critical discourse produced in the East can formulate a coherent reading of talking back to the West and can participate in the production of global knowledge on an equal footing.

In the special issue of Replika Anna Wessely (1996 [1991]) argued that social sciences in this region are embedded in a socio-historic context that Norbert Elias calls 'Kultur' (as opposed to civilisation) and Immanuel Wallerstein calls 'semi-periphery' (as opposed both to the centre and to the periphery). Also, modernisation has taken a specific shape in this region: it has been a one-sided, state-controlled process, unaccompanied by the development of civil society, while many members of these societies have experienced the type of social relationship described as characteristic of the 'stranger' by Simmel. Jewish intellectuals in the region certainly had this experience and could therefore act as interpreters between various cultures. Mention must also be made of the specific process of embourgeoisement in countries of the region such as Hungary, where this process was dominated by 'strangers' (Jews and Germans). This special type of modernisation shaped not only the social experience of these countries but also the epistemological perspectives of their social scientists.

Eastern Europeans in general experienced the secular coexistence of various ethnic, religious, and linguistic communities on the territories of belatedly evolved nation states – a situation which generated a therapeutic intent expressed through languages of translation such as Mannheim's sociology of knowledge, Freud's psychoanalysis, and Wittgenstein's philosophy of language games, which all refer to a pre-theoretical background, whether *Weltanschauung*, *Lebensform*, or *Unbehagen*. A similarly motivated refusal or apprehension to follow the rules of academic social science has given rise to a specific genre – sociography – in many East European countries, especially Poland, Hungary and Romania. This academic output – to which György Szerbhorváth's essay in this issue refers – is characterised by undifferentiated and metaphorical social discourse that blend fiction, political pamphlet, essay and formal scholarship. In the debate that followed György Lengyel called this the "problem-oriented" approach (as opposed to the "paradigm-oriented" scientific methods).

Eastern Europe invented public sociology decades before Michael Burawoy (2005) theorised about it. The most striking example of this posture is that of social scientists-activists devoted to the study *and* emancipation of the Roma in Hungary and elsewhere, active as researchers, experts and public intellectuals at the same time, both before and after 1989.

While obstacles to this approach and the subsequent movement that it brought into being were hardly scarce after 1989 either, this cognitive stance (if it has ever dominated the region at all) has been progressively marginalised in the field of social sciences, and mainstream social science has become hegemonic. To formulate it in Wessely's provocatively normative terms: the region's social scientists didn't take this *chance* after 1989 – they didn't cultivate their difference enough.

Why? Csepeli, Örkény and Scheppele (1996) argued that East European social sciences acquired an "immune deficiency syndrome", as they were "colonialized" by Western peers, who ascribed them the role of raw data suppliers, while carrying out massive brain drain. This aspect of being colonized by the West is addressed and critically dealt with in almost all papers in the issue, and it is also discussed in the interview with Zsuzsa Ferge, Miklós Hadas and Iván Szelényi moderated by Judit Durst.

A tough debate followed Csepeli's, Örkény's and Scheppele's article. Rudolf Andorka (Andorka, 1996) disagreed with "almost everything" they said and urged social scientists to cooperate with their Western colleagues more. However, paradoxically enough, he sort of corroborated Csepeli's conclusion by admitting that "Hungarian sociologists are less involved in theoretical discussions on the character of the transition going on in these countries", i.e. that they had indeed become rough data suppliers (Andorka, 1996: 127). Zuzana Kusá was "astonished by the accuracy of the authors' analysis in regard to the state of social sciences (certainly sociology) in Slovakia", claiming that "the «invisible hand» of the domestic market for sociological products will force us into the position of data collectors" (Kusa, 1996: 129 and 135).

Indeed, many Eastern European scholars can rightly feel that there is a massive decline in political and academic interest in the region, which has put local actors in an unfavourable position in the global hierarchy of knowledge production. This decline of interest is best shown by the gradual disappearance of departments of Eastern European history in Western countries, including Germany and Austria.

Knowledge-producing institutions and techniques – while determining our professional identities – remain the means of producing and reproducing global inequalities in power, prestige, influence and capital. Coloniality in knowledge production seems to be an apt keyword to grasp both the institutional and epistemological sides of global inequalities in academic life. Firstly, as stressed in the papers and the interview published in this issue, global knowledge is mainly produced at Western universities, thanks to unequal funding and publishing opportunities. Secondly, and even more importantly, concepts developed originally for Western societies are imported and imposed on the specific Eastern social structures and development, which thus loses its specificity and becomes a region without a history (of its own). Postcolonial criticism can therefore be readily applied to liberate Eastern European social sciences from this Western bias.

The papers presented in this thematic issue, together with the interview with three famous Hungarian sociologists, who have worked in different academic milieus, are all engaged in a fruitful discussion about Eastern European specificity and the ways in which this specificity can be addressed without reproducing Cold War stereotypes or entering into a self-enclosed realm of producing parochial knowledge of provincial countries, which can therefore be rightfully dismissed by the West. We start with Júlia Szalai's paper, which, while recognizing the essential *structural* inequalities of knowledge production, gives a historical analysis of the differing forms of sociological knowledge related to the Cold War environment and the division of the world into the socialist and capitalist camps, which shaped the mental framework of the sociologists belonging to the two camps and their understanding of what sociology is. It is worth recapitulating some of her thoughts in this introduction. The establishment of the bipolar world order and the rise of the welfare state gave sociology a remarkable position in the Western world, for it seemed an apt science to deal with relations between the individual and the state and to transmit knowledge for policy-makers. The practitioners of sociology enjoyed an accordingly high social and academic prestige as they were frequently called upon to share their opinion with the public and to set the agenda for a wide discourse outside of academia. The 1960s strengthened this role of public sociology in the West, for many expected the coming of the world revolution or at least the political victory of the Left, which envisaged intervention in the market and necessitated further social engineering.

Sociology followed a different trajectory in the East, where it was not until de-Stalinization took place that social engineering and scientific methods could replace the rigid Marxist-Leninist dogma which had been used as a legitimating discourse and also as part of education (Marxism-Leninism was a compulsory subject at universities). Sociologists soon became either dissident intellectuals or active supporters of the reform movement, whose aim was to establish socialism with a human face. The Marxist revival of the 1960s went hand in hand with sociology becoming the queen of social sciences, as Iván Szelényi put it in the interview.

While the reform movements were halted everywhere in Eastern Europe after the violent oppression of the Prague Spring, Hungary was, indeed, a specific case, where there was only a partial retreat from the reform movement. Ágnes Gagyi's paper nicely shows how the integration of the national economy in the global world system went hand in hand with the building of a new expertise: scholars who later became either critical sociologists or neoliberal policy-makers or entrepreneurs. But

before 1989 the governmental intention to build up a 'feasible socialism' rendered sociology a very prestigious science.

One can indeed argue that this was the golden age of sociology, which coincided with the golden age of East European studies. The region was interesting for the West because (for varying reasons) it wanted to understand what kind of system socialism was and what made Eastern Europe 'specific' – both in comparison with Soviet Russia (from which 'Central Europe' was distinguished) and in comparison with the capitalist West. The historical school, which could boast of scholars such as Zsigmond Pál Pach, György Ránki, Iván T. Berend and Emil Niederhauser, and which drew heavily on Marxist intellectual heritage, produced works which placed the Eastern European specificity in a long durée context and read the region's backwardness (or belated or incomplete modernisation) in the global context of capitalist development. In sociology, social stratification and class formation were topics where Eastern European scholars' work paralleled that of their Western counterparts (Zsuzsa Ferge and Iván Szelényi are examples of such specific Eastern "inputs"). The work of dissident intellectuals also received attention because they were critical of the ruling regime and highlighted some of its neuralgic points (poverty, high suicide rates or criticism of the nomenklatura were all among the taboo topics).

The defeat of the Left and the rise of neoliberal capitalism placed Western sociology in a markedly different context. As Júlia Szalai notes, society and the individual become two separate entities, which are investigated in distinct disciplinary frameworks. The fragmentation of sociology went hand in hand with the loss of the appeal of macro theories and the formerly popular grand topics of class formation, social stratification or the functioning of socialism. Given the fact that sociology was largely linked to the leftist revival of the 1960s and that the anticipated world revolution failed to materialize, sociology has lost its public appeal.

The change of regimes opened up new opportunities for Western scholars to act as social engineers and help create democratic institutions and a working civil society from scratch. While their concepts were somewhat shaken by the crisis of the welfare state, they were still in a better epistemological position than their East European counterparts, whose originally Marxist concepts were all seen as belonging to the dustbin of history. Their quest for new concepts and ideologies coincided with the Western political and economic 'conquest' of the region, thus completing the colonization of the mind.

To escape a pessimistic end, Júlia Szalai brings positive examples where Western concepts were reformulated in order to account for specific Eastern European phenomena. By reinterpreting the content of Western paradigms, she argues, a productive East-West dialogue can take place, where, in turn, specific Eastern European scholarship can be interesting and relevant for the West. She demonstrates this with the example of the exclusion of the Roma minority, and the interpretation of the second economy in Hungary.

The argument of the colonization of the mind and the global hierarchies of knowledge production structures is taken further in Madina Tlostanova's paper 'Can the post-Soviet think?'. While Júlia Szalai argues that mutual uncertainties (and mistrust), more than an intentional conquest on behalf of Westerners, played a crucial role in the formation of East-West relations (thus she prefers to call it "domesticated domination" and "the erosion of professional solidarity"), Madina Tlostanova speaks

of an omnipresent coloniality in knowledge production, from which Russia (together with many other countries of the periphery and semi-periphery) is excluded. Coloniality of knowledge – a term coined by the international decolonial collective – refers to a condition which we mentioned above: that modernisation has produced a set of concepts and categories through which the colonised subject interprets his/her own history. Since the concepts were originally developed to account for Western development, in the East this history – alongside modernity – appears to be incomplete, partial or non-existent. Above all, Madina Tlostanova argues, modernity is a knowledge-generating system in which the colonial subject is denied rationality. The knowledge produced in the West thus becomes the means of female oppression and racial differentiation.

Madina Tlostanova demonstrates coloniality in knowledge production with the example of post-socialist Russia. While Soviet studies prospered during the cold war, the collapse of state socialism and the subsequent collapse of the bipolar world order rendered Russia an impoverished semi-peripheral country, one that is struggling to keep together at least some of her former colonies. The Russian academy is almost invisible in the West – Russian scholars can make their way into the Western academy only at the price of accepting the Western master-narrative and producing histories based on the use of Western concepts and paradigms. Through this lens, Russian history appears to be essentially incomplete, partial and inferior in comparison to the West. Madina Tlostanova offers ample examples to demonstrate the working of the colonized mind, while she remains highly critical of "indigenous" literature, characterised as it is by imperial orthodoxy. Thus, it seems, it is hard to find a way out of this epistemological trap: either coloniality in knowledge production or its transfer to Russia's former colonies, which have to accept Russian superiority in the interpretation of their own histories. This is what Madina Tlostanova calls double colonial difference. In addition, de-linking from the West often produces parochial scholarship, suitable for the power games of imperial Russia, but rightfully dismissed in the West.

The application of the coloniality of knowledge to the East gives us even less hope than the argument that there is a global inequality of funding and publishing opportunities which prevents Eastern European scholars from rendering themselves visible in the West. How can we make ourselves visible if we can but produce theories which have long ago been surpassed in the Western academy? How can we overcome coloniality in knowledge production and develop something really different and specific to our region, which at the same time has a global reference? Madina Tlostanova argues that we should create a self-reflexive social science which has an empirical relevance – and train self-reflexive individuals who do not accept ready-made truths at face value and who are ready to engage in a critical dialogue. The picture is somewhat darkened by the fact that she is highly critical of the existing Soviet academic system, which seems to work to precisely the opposite end.

Norbert Petrovici applies the above thesis to the socialism/postsocialism divide, arguing that it produces narratives that are liable for the epistemic provincialization of the regime. During the Cold War the socialist system was the specificity of the region, which needed to be theorized and interpreted in order to understand the functioning of the 'enemy' (or, for many Western leftists, the functioning of an existing Marxist experiment). With the collapse of state socialism, not only was the Marxist-Leninist

legitimating discourse thrown into the dustbin, but many Eastern European intellectuals felt an urgent need to get rid of the whole Marxist intellectual heritage and produce new legitimating narratives for the new elite. This aspiration coincided with Western attempts to marginalize the positions of the Eastern left, which for them smelled of Communism – regardless of the transformation of the postcommunist elite. Thus the functioning of socialism was re-interpreted, and old totalitarian theories, which had once been discredited in the Western academy in the 1970s, again came to dominate the discourse about state socialism.

Norbert Petrovici argues that, thanks to this, the *critical* agenda of Eastern European scholars is left unexplored. While it is true that many Eastern European scholars participate in producing the self-Orientalizing narrative on 'socialism' and 'postsocialism', and that, by doing so, the East is taken out from the normal flow of history (a typical symptom of coloniality in knowledge production), even Western scholars sympathetic to the Eastern concerns fall into the trap of Orientalizing. Norbert Petrovici demonstrates this with the example of labelling socialism as a shortage economy, one which elicited a fierce debate in anthropology. He argues that Western critical scholars are likewise blind to the essential global framework in which much of the Eastern knowledge is produced, and thereby they tend to reproduce Orientalizing discourses as if the East would indeed be unable to produce anything other than outdated Western theories. The Western critical scholars thus deny the right of the Eastern scholars to have a critical agenda, thereby usurping the right for themselves essentially to speak on behalf of the East. Norbert Petrovici argues that there is a great deal of critical knowledge accumulated and practiced in the East that needs to be taken into account. He also discusses Szelényi's under-urbanisation thesis to illustrate, as he notes, how epistemic enclavizations are produced when emptying the region of history and attributing it to the West. The undertone of the narrative is that the modernity run by the socialist state is a partial modernity, a mock modernity of an industrial economy constrained by the systemic need of a primary sector which cannot be superseded. There is an alternative reading proposed by Bodnár (2001) that can be taken further, since there are parallel processes in the West: unpaid labour and partial monetization of labour runs through all the history of capital accumulation. But, once again, the critical intent is lost if we remove Eastern Europe from 'history proper' and put the region on another track. Similarly, de-industrialization took place in the West even though the West did not have socialism and socialist cities – it is, therefore, worth focusing on the essentially *global context* of development, rather than on the socialist 'other' and thereby reproducing Orientalizing narratives.

Norbert Petrovici's urge to accept the voice of the Eastern European critical scholar dovetails with the call from Júlia Szalai for a productive East-West dialogue and with the de-colonized mind and self-reflexive individual that Madina Tlostanova urges. The same is true of the position of Ágnes Gagyi, who in her paper gives an excellent example of how to interpret a local case study in a global context. She uses the example of the FRI (Financial Research Institute) in Hungary to demonstrate how global processes of the development of capitalism impacted on Hungary's policy-makers, and how internationally-recognized expertise was established in FRI originally to give intellectual munition to economic reforms. She concentrates on the linkages between the dynamics of the national economy, economic policies and broader shifts in the integration of national economies into the world economy, as conditioned by

the transformations of the world economy itself. She also offers a discussion of the place of FRI in the reform process as well as an analysis of the historical and intellectual roots of the document *Fordulat és reform* (Change and Reform), which was a declaration of the position of the FRI authors *vis-à-vis* the state of the reform. In May 1987 the Institute was closed by the Ministry of Finance, and some of its former colleagues were invited to work in the state apparatus, while the bulk of them founded a private research company, Financial Research Institute. While most became supporters of neoliberal economic policy, some, like Erzsébet Szalai, maintained their left-wing critical position even after the change of regime.

György Szerbhorváth focuses on an issue which has been partially dealt with in the above papers: the act of borrowing from different genres, which has a long tradition in Eastern European sociology. He discusses the issue of how far literature can inform sociology, and, indeed, to what extent literature is concerned with topics of Hungarian 'realities'. Sociography was a remarkably successful genre in interwar Hungary, where writers assumed a role not only as transmitters and interpreters of the voices of the 'folk' but also as social reformers. Anna Wessely, in a text quoted above, and speaking of sociography and other mixed genres, argued that we need to stay in touch with the specific Hungarian/Central European social experience. György Szerbhorváth shows that Hungarian literature has not lost its critical potential since 1989; on the contrary, it is precisely on the basis of these premises that real art and literature has been produced.

Our intellectual journey takes us back to where we started: how can Eastern European sociology be presented to the West? Where is its place? And how should we create a sociology in this new context that speaks both to the East and the West? Are we 'special', or rather "incomplete, partial or lacking any real history and modernity"? Has the regional specificity of social science ever existed? If so, what are its characteristics that are still relevant, 25 years after the end of the political East-West divide and the outbreak of this debate? Can Eastern social science enlighten its Western peers? Or only provide them with data, meaning that the best we can do is to be contented with producing parochial knowledge? At the end of the journey we are still struggling with the same questions – but we hope that the papers have offered, if not answers, then illuminating intellectual munition to think further and go beyond historically rooted stereotypes reinforced by the region's specific experiment to establish an alternative to capitalism.

Elemér Hankiss was someone who personally and ideally incarnated this East-West intellectual dialogue. The leading humanist philosopher, literary historian and sociologist, who died recently and to whom a posthumous interview is dedicated in this Journal, asked and tried to answer universal questions (e.g. why and how humans build a symbolic world that protects them from all kinds of threats) inspired by his own Central European experience of a civilisation that had been collapsed and resuscitated so many times.

All the main questions discussed above recur in the interview with Zsuzsa Ferge, Miklós Hadas and Iván Szelényi, moderated by Judit Durst, which completes our thematic issue. In their own way, all of the three great scholars contributed in practice to the productive East/West dialogue which Júlia Szalai calls for. Their specific achievement was to integrate local knowledge into a global framework and thereby step out of the trap of coloniality in knowledge production. They are critical

Eastern European intellectuals who received international recognition. The crisis of sociology, the very nature of social science, the East/West divide and coloniality, and the appearance and increasing appeal of new disciplines (gender studies, postcolonial studies, anthropology, etc.) are viewed differently by the three scholars, but they share a common concern for public sociology. Sociology cannot be practised from the ivory tower – and part of the Eastern European specificity is the rapidly changing social terrain, one that is often prone to radical ideologies and neo-nationalism. We have discussed at length that the region has been marginalized in the Western academy. Recent developments (the ongoing war in the Ukraine, the establishment of autocratic governments, and the strengthening of radical right-wing populism[1] in the region) anticipate a renewed interest, however – an interest that is won at a very high price. There is an increasing need for self-reflexive, critical social scientists who can act as interpreters between the East and West. While sociologists such as Zsuzsa Ferge, Elemér Hankiss, Júlia Szalai, Miklós Hadas and Iván Szelényi provide an example of how it has been possible to assume this role, the papers written by a younger generation of critical sociologists suggest that there is hope for the continuation of this tradition.

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[1] See the first issue of Intersections: 'Mainstreaming the extreme'.