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Post-Communist Democratization and the Practice of Sociology in Central and Eastern Europe

Abstract

During the 1948-1989 period, the situation in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) resembled to some extent the situation of the countries under the colonial and under the authoritarian rules. It differed from the latter two, though. The population and culture (including social sciences) in the socialist “metropolis” (the Soviet Union) was as suppressed as those of the peripheries. Terror, indoctrination and very strict political control made it hardly possible to develop free culture, including free teaching of sociology, uncensored research projects and uncensored publications. Quite few sociologists were put in jail or expelled from their countries but social sciences were under a very strict control. Political authorities needed descriptive social sciences and the information they might provide and sometimes they used this information but did not allow sociology to be a self-consciousness of societies and to play reflexive and critical functions other than that (for instance through free teaching and publications).

In the paper, we present three aspects of the post-1988 transformation of sociology in the region. The “sociological transformation” was a reaction on the recent structural changes in societies but also a reaction on the historically rooted different cultures, economic systems from before Communism and during the 1948-1988 period as well as the ways the Communist system was in fact administered in individual countries. These three aspects are: 1/ “de-Communization” and “de-Marxization” of sociology; 2/ the spread of university education in the field of sociology, and 3/ the new research topics.

For most of the parties involved: the political authorities, the general public and a large number of sociologists, Marxism was, during the 1948-1988 period, considered to be the ideological fundament of Communism. This Marxist-Communist concept was not deconstructed after 1988 and the criticisms of Communism meant a criticism of Marxism. However, de-Communization and de-Marxization of sociology had their peculiarities in individual countries and we are briefly presenting them and suggest some hypotheses that might explain them.

Sociology became a very popular major among the college and university students in CEE after 1988. The two-way street between academic sociology and the public became much busier than before.

Under Communism, sociology was forced to avoid many potential relevant research areas. Other areas were cultivated but under strict political control. We present those research topics that are new in a few senses of the term.

Sociology and its internal development is an aspect of the systemic transformation of the whole region but also is a means of the analysis of the process of transformation. It is a means of the social self-reflection, self-analysis as well. Some lessons from the analysis of sociology in CEE could, perhaps, extend beyond the context and the CEE-an local knowledge can become globalized in the sense that it can show some interesting paths of the development of sociology in societies which are on their complicated road to democracy and free market.