

Helmut Wiesenthal
Humboldt University at Berlin

IT'S NOT EAST VERSUS WEST, IT'S A GLOBAL DIVISION.

A Response on the Articles of György Csepeli, Antal Örkény and Kim Lane Scheppele.

Reflecting upon the causes of Eastern discontent with Western social science (and the behavioral style displayed by its proudest protagonists in particular) as outlined in the papers by György Csepeli, Antal Örkény and Kim Lane Scheppele one feels strongly reminded of the post-1989 „German“ situation. Because East-German intellectuals were the least likely to be allowed to travel around and meet with Western colleagues, the experience of some sort of a cultural clash - and subsequent alienation from the new professional environment - was and still is widespread. Most of the indicators of an intellectual discrepancy that are mentioned by Csepeli, Örkény and Scheppele appear to me much more representative of the divided All-German culture than of the (academic, of course not the socio-economic) situation of my colleagues in East Central Europe.

Upon the basis of this „regional“ bias, I would like to focus on a peculiar aspect of the - in my view well justified and far too long postponed - East-West controversy, namely its relation with the crisis of social sciences as it is derived from their roots in religion, philosophy and politics. Of course, it sounds a bit boring to talk about social sciences in crisis since the detection (and even the proclamation) of crises was continuously at the center of social science practice. So was the reflexive, self-oriented use of the concept as well.

Social science of today is anything but an unitary or even a single discipline. It is a plurality of differentiated and theoretically as well as epistemologically divided groupings of theories and practices. Its major lines of division do not appear to be between Eastern and Western academic cultures but between the two cultures once identified by C.P. Snow. With the advantages made in recent decades above all in economics (sic), data-processing and formal analysis, the methodology and communicative style of (natural) science gained ground in several of the once well-contained and mostly self-referential fields of social science, above all political science. As a consequence, a split becomes visible between the more formal and „positive“ approaches (such as game theory, models of social choice or information economics) on the one hand and the inherited ways of reflecting upon social and political phenomena. In its best representations, the split is one between theoretical explanation and reasoned judgement. In its worst appearances we envisage a clash between professional modesty (associated with competence) and pastoral reasoning (associated with metaphysics). This split extends throughout the global academia including the Americas, South-East Asia and, of course, Europe.

Most interestingly, the smaller the national academia (let's say of Denmark or Norway in comparison with France or Germany) the less likely it is that it detaches itself from an understanding of social sciences as an global intellectual endeavor. As a global thing, social sciences are irreversibly subjected to joint professional standards and the rules of competition - altogether resulting in a steadily rising state of the art. There are a lot of arguments calling this sort of progress into question. However, what one has to acknowledge is that on the course of increasing specialization and formalization, real „truth“ in terms of theoretically sound explanations is to be gained. This means that social sciences successfully continue in attacking the realm of popular myths and misunderstandings. This, by the way, is the case even when rational choice theory would only help us to understand why actors fail to behave rationally and, instead, fall back on ritualist practices. Taking the concept of center and

periphery seriously, we might see the exact same sites at both extremes: universities in the US, the UK, in Germany, South Korea, Russia and many other countries being occupied at the same time by adherents of scientific competition as well as practitioners of pastoral reasoning.

An awkward consequence of enforced competition is that the professionals with scientific orientation will always be among the winners. Unlike those intellectuals that feel disgusted by the technical attitudes of social „scientists“, the latter would gain from competition even if they come in second. This is at least as long they remain capable of recognizing the fruits of the race and making use of them. Whereas in the first half of the century intellectuals were held competent in and sufficiently informed about the basics of social science and social philosophy, today only a few (and tomorrow even fewer) intellectuals are capable of basing normative judgements on solid positive theoretical and empirical knowledge. With the rapid change and internal differentiation of social-scientific disciplines the gap becomes unbridgeable between state of the art explanations of the world as it is, on the one hand, and the warnings and complaints issued by well-meaning commentators on the other.

Let me sum up my argument as follows. What we experience as a controversy between Eastern and Western styles of social science is nothing else than a, admittedly enhanced, articulation of the thoroughgoing changes in the intellectual worlds of today. There is little reason for praising the quite ambiguous consequences. However, because laments do not change anything, one has to acknowledge what appear to be the options. Intellectualism based on sophisticated styles of communication, rules of elitist behavior, and the flattering prospect of becoming the priests of society, increasingly lacks in justification. On the contrary, intellectuals clinging to their historical script and focusing solely on what may be the remainders of „local“ culture are close to becoming preachers and medicine men. Thus, social scientists and intellectuals in most places in the world have to make a choice that, not surprisingly, is extremely hard in present Eastern Europe: the choice between remaining (or hoping to become) a local hero, on the one hand, and sweating over manuscripts that might fit the standards of refereed international journals, on the other. Choosing the latter, of course, does in no way preclude to engage in moral debates - in the role of a responsible citizen.