

Book Review: Three Social Science Disciplines in Central and Eastern Europe: Handbook on Economics, Political Science and Sociology (1989-2001)

Edited by Max Kaase, Vera Sparschuh, and Agnieszka Wenninger, 2002. Berlin and Budapest: Social Science Information Center and Collegium Budapest.

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When thinking about the legacy of the communist regimes upon the social sciences, I always remember a story from a Czech friend, who was interrupted at the outset of his oral exams on Marxist economics in the 1980s. “You realize this is all nonsense, right?” his examiner asked. My friend, uncertain how to respond, risked nodding quickly. “Good, then you may continue,” the examiner indicated.

The social sciences in Central and Eastern Europe faced tremendous obstacles after the fall of communism, not least of which were educational institutions distorted by the old regimes. This volume reports that their re-constitution had to be carried out largely by those educated under the old system. In the face of low salaries and scarce funding, many talented younger social scientists left the region to pursue funding opportunities abroad. Social science faced an internal “brain drain” as well, since new prospective cohorts were more likely to opt for higher paying jobs in the private sector than in the academy. Lastly, social scientists in the region struggled to define their role in changing societies, somewhere between the continental public intellectual and the Anglo-American “academic.” Indeed, in the 1990s some scholars (both from the old regime and former-dissidents) became leading politicians. This may have been most prominent for economists (think of Leszek Balcerowicz or Vaclav Klaus), but social science as a whole struggled with its responsibilities when writing history and analyzing current events could be deeply political acts.

This nearly seven hundred-page volume reviews developments in economics, political science and sociology, disciplines typically studied before 1989 as part of Marxism-Leninism. Written by social scientists from the region, it contains overviews and ten country reports on each discipline, with additional chapters on cultural and social anthropology, demography, geography, and legal studies. The chapters draw on surveys of institutions in the region conducted by the GESIS/Social Science Institute in Berlin and the Wissenschaftszentrum in Berlin and come with a CD Rom detailing their findings.

The handbook provides a valuable resource for information on developments in particular countries. It is less successful in providing a systematic portrait of developments in the region. Any such evaluations tend to be impressionistic and depend on how the author evaluates change. Is the glass half full or half empty? Or perhaps, is the glass filling quickly enough or at all? The chapters contain scathing portraits of condescending Westerners and foreign donors, as well as pleas for the survival of domestic traditions. Country reports in each discipline however allow for a more nuanced portrait of a

complex region with differing legacies of the old regimes with a range of ideological rigidity and repression, from the Baltic countries formerly part of the Soviet Union or Romania on the one extreme to the relative openness in Slovenia. These chapters allow us to see pockets of scholarly activity that survived communism, such as Polish sociology.

All of the cases highlight questions about the diffusion of Western models of pedagogy, inquiry and analysis to Central and Eastern Europe. They raise questions about institutional dependency, pre-communist legacies and the influence of external funding upon patterns of change. The handbook finds varying departures from the Soviet model of education that separated teaching at universities from research at academies of science. The chapters report ongoing tensions between reconstituting basic research and addressing contemporary concerns, from EU enlargement to minority studies. While the Central European University in Budapest is repeatedly noted as one of the few efforts to reconstitute social science in the region, most local institutions have struggled, lacking a benefactor like George Soros.

Many contributors deplore the disproportionate influence of external funding and the fact that social science textbooks are rarely written in native languages any longer but translated from Anglo-American textbooks or even simply published in English. Despite widespread concerns, there appear to be sources of hope. Professional disciplinary journals seem to have flourished so that, even though they may not yet be peer reviewed in every case, Hans-Dieter Klingemann finds that “there is not a single country that fails to offer a journal to publish and discuss political science topics in its own language.” (208)

Among many strong contributions, I recommend highly the chapter by Hans-Jürgen Wagener summarizing developments in economics for finding an insightful balance among systematic analysis, appreciation for the regional and country-specific legacies, and hardnosed assessment of developments in the field. One hopes that the editors will find the resources to report in another ten years so that we can continue to evaluate this complex and unfolding process of educational change.