

Lost Mission or Interdisciplinary Realignment?  
The plight of sociology and the role of the sociologist  
from the (semi-)periphery

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Zsuzsa Ferge, Iván Szelényi, Miklós Hadas – three prominent and acclaimed social scientist in the field not only of the Hungarian but also of international sociology and social sciences.

Szelényi, an Emeritus Professor of sociology and political science at Yale University, and a former dean of Social Sciences at New York University Abu Dhabi; Ferge, a Professor Emeritus at Eötvös Loránd University of Sciences, Budapest; and Hadas, a professor at Corvinus University in Budapest and a visiting professor at Central European University – not only have made outstanding contributions to their discipline, but also greatly influenced many of their student’s work.

Judit Durst is one of them. She has currently been working on a comparative monograph on Szelényi’s and Ferge’s work in the context of the birth of Hungarian critical sociology - the interview below is part of this project.

**Judit Durst.** The central topic of the current issue of *Intersections* is whether social scientists in Hungary, Central-Eastern Europe or other (semi-)peripheries of the world have a specific role, a specific voice. This question refers back to the question raised earlier in the journal *Replika*, edited by Miklós Hadas. This issue from 1996 asked if mainstream sociology colonizes sociologies of the (semi-)peripheries.<sup>1</sup>

But before we begin discussing this, I would be interested in how you see “our science”: the situation of sociology within the social sciences. Iván has recently written an essay for Michael Burawoy about this topic.<sup>2</sup>

**Iván Szelényi.** Sociology as a discipline is in a multiple crisis. I think the primary crisis is that when sociology was at its peak, say in the 60s and perhaps the 70s, it had a clear political mission. At that time, the best students wanted to study sociology. In this respect, there was no difference between Hungary, the United States of America, England, or Australia.

But this was due to political reasons. There was a strong leftist political movement in the world. It seemed that some kind of left alternative was feasible. By the way, this applied both to the East and the West. In Hungary, we also thought in the 60s that some kind of reform can transform socialism into socialism with a human face. The Western student movements hoped that capitalism could also turn capitalism with a human face. And sociology played a pioneering role in this among the social sciences. The quality of our students was as good as in economics, and most likely better than in political science. And political scientists, good political scientists, in fact did sociology.

This came to an end in the 70s. The left lost its significance, and in particular students lost their interest in the left. Many say that in the 60s teachers were conservative and students were radical leftists, while today students are conservative and among the older generation of teachers who have stayed in university faculties since the 60s, a few are still leftist and radical. Thus it is a mission crisis. Sociology has lost its political function.

**J.D.** “The other reason for the crisis of sociology is that we are having a methodological crisis” – Iván recently said this in a discussion with Tamás Kolosi, moderated by Imre Kovách, in the Hungarian Institute of Sociology<sup>3</sup>. What is the nature of this crisis?

**I.Sz.** Perhaps this might be a crisis for the whole of social science, but economists and political scientists think that they can overcome it, while we sociologists believe that we

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<sup>1</sup> Hadas, M. and M. Vörös (1996) (eds.) *Colonization or Partnership? Eastern Europe and Western Social Sciences*. Replika special issue. Budapest: Replika kör.

<sup>2</sup> Szelényi, I. (2015) *The Triple Crisis of Sociology*. <http://contexts.org/blog/the-triple-crisis-of-sociology/> Accessed: 20-04-2015. Also in: *Global Dialogue* 5 (2)

<sup>3</sup> Kovách, I. (2014) Beszélgetés Kolosi Tamással és Szelényi Ivámmal a társadalmi egyenlőtlenségekről (Discussion with Tamás Kolosi and Iván Szelényi about social inequalities). *Socio.hu*, (13): 1-17. [www.socio.hu/uploads/files/2014\\_3/kolosi\\_szelenyi.pdf](http://www.socio.hu/uploads/files/2014_3/kolosi_szelenyi.pdf) Accessed: 18-06-2015.

can't. One can even argue in this respect sociology still may be in a better shape than economics or political science.

What is this methodological crisis? Simply that the problem of causality has become a central issue in social science. In other words, one can't be a serious researcher if one doesn't test causality. The problem is how on earth one can test causality in a serious way. The only method is through experiment. But to experiment one needs an assignment. It means not a random selection, not a random sample, but a random assignment. That there is a group which is exposed to a treatment, and I form another group, the so-called control group, which is not exposed to such treatment. Now, this experimental method has spread wildly in economics, and nowadays almost everyone who considers himself/herself important tries to do this.

**J.D. But you also said in the discussion mentioned above that this method has very little to do with realities.**

**I.Sz.** Well, yes. But it is terribly scientific. In the last fifteen years, this **experimental** modelling has started in economics. They try to put on a scientific appearance. But it is the same in political science- today 'old school' politologists, like Martin Lipset hardly count as political scientists. Only those become assistant professors in a department of political science who make experiments, and whose articles look like the articles in the discipline of economics. Those who make models. From plastic data. From artificial data. And the results which these professors produce from such data usually have no external validity. And the catastrophe is that they make theories out of this later on, and to top it all economists listen to these theories, and decide on the basis of them whether budgets need to be balanced or not. But their data is often gained on the basis of responses from thirty middle-class, mostly white students. That's why this data is plastic.

This experimental method is taken seriously in the academic world - though more in the United States of America than in France or the UK - and those who work with this method consider themselves to be respectable academics.

Let me add something to this. The problem of sociology is that our major method is survey research based on random samples. Our main issue is representativeness. By the way, this is also precisely the advantage of sociology, because it gives external validity to what we say. At the same time, a survey is not suitable for measuring causality. Survey researchers have tried other technologies: panel studies and life history interviews, for example, are both good ideas but do not resolve the fundamental problem: sample selection bias (in panel studies, you lose population over time, while in life history studies you have a serious problem with 'memory', as people tend to remember their own lives rather selectively).

The real solution to the causality problem is if we say that science is what makes causal statements and establishes causal relationships. But for this one needs to conduct experiments. And we can't conduct them. Perhaps we need to draw the conclusion that social sciences are not, in the strict sense of the word, sciences. And maybe after a while economists and political scientists will realize that they are on a wrong track because they are trying to make something (a 'real science') out of social science which it is just not capable of.

**J.D.** Well, I could have many reflections on this, but this discussion is not about me, so I'd rather ask others for their opinion. **Zsuzsa and Miklós**, what do you think of what **Iván** has raised? And I must have a final question for **Iván**: if I understood you well, only natural science can be considered science, because it makes scientific causality statements and produces cause-effect relationships?

**I.Sz.** It depends. If you say it in German, naturally *Wissenschaft* is a much more comprehensive term. A *Wissenschaftler* is someone who works with 'knowledge', who knows everything about the (researched) topic... But if one says 'science' in English, then yes, science is a body of knowledge where causal relationships can be tested, hypotheses can be falsified.

But to avoid misunderstandings between us: I didn't make a value judgement but an analysis of the current state of sociology. The question was the place of sociology among the social sciences. And I replied that while in the 60s sociology was the queen of the social sciences, today it is their maid. And the reason for this is that it has lost what earlier made it the queen: its political function.

**J.D.** **Zsuzsa**, what is your opinion about **Iván's** analysis of the situation?

**Zsuzsa Ferge.** I would definitely set apart the two questions raised by **Iván**, the epistemological and the methodological one, because they are of different types. Methodology should be discussed separately from the question of what is a science and what isn't. For me the latter is a much shorter question.

**Iván** has an enormous advantage over me because in the last couple of decades he has breathed in the international air, where, how should I say, information was flowing. But at the same time, I think his disadvantage is that the information, impressions, experiences, and expectations come from a North American domain. I certainly think about the relationship of science and *Wissenschaft* in a different way: that *Wissenschaft* is science in general, while the English word 'science' has become limited to the natural sciences in accordance with the American concept. Also, I firmly believe that science is not made by examining causalities. Have mathematicians ever spoken of causality? Of experiments? History also doesn't make for experimental modelling... So I think **Iván** is afraid, as **Tamás Kolosi** was also afraid of it in the already mentioned discussion,<sup>4</sup> that we will move towards cultural sociology, human sociology etc. And I don't want to say much more about this because I don't believe that it will really take us anywhere. I will allow that some think we need to do a science type of sociology – let them try. If they don't succeed, they will do something else. **Iván** always does different things, too.

For me, our science (discipline) begins with an interest in the relationship between man and society. Then I try to raise an interesting question out of this whole process/story, with its entire history, and try to define its terms and concepts. I think what **Iván** calls a "science" is when we try to work on the concepts and (re)create them

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<sup>4</sup> Kovách, I. (2014) Beszélgetés Kolosi Tamással és Szelényi Ivámmal a társadalmi egyenlőtlenségekről (Discussion with Tamás Kolosi and Iván Szelényi about social inequalities). *Socio.hu*, (13): 1-17. [www.socio.hu/uploads/files/2014\\_3/kolosi\\_szelenyi.pdf](http://www.socio.hu/uploads/files/2014_3/kolosi_szelenyi.pdf) Accessed: 18-06-2015.

from the phenomena we deal with, instead of purely writing about the phenomenon as it is present in its natural being.

And what am I interested in? For instance, why is there an interrupted continuity in many processes? That a politically rather indifferent nation can be drawn into a crazy, let's say, Nazi ideology, or nationalistic ideology. And then the same population, (seemingly? or effectively?) stuck into these ideologies, all of a sudden forgets, or suppresses these emotions, and seems to become something totally different.

Then a few decades pass, a social rupture happens, and earlier madresses can be revoked again. It means that there is a strong path-dependency which may return with certain interruptions. We already found such a path-dependency in our research carried out at the beginning of the 80s, at that time in the lives of successive generations.

It would be good to understand what has happened in sociological terms to society, to people's life circumstances, to the political system of manipulation; what has happened to symbolic and also to real violence, to economic violence in the last period. Who has practiced it, with what purpose, and what experiences have people gained when they went through certain routes of social mobility?

For instance, as far as I can see, most of our troubles are rooted in the unprocessed history of social mobility over the last fifty years. No one asked about and no one reflected on what it meant to change the social context – not only spatially but also in regards to social relations and customs.

So there are important unanswered questions. And we should create precise concepts to ask and answer these questions properly. Than we should see which methods would be best placed to respond to them: survey, interview, thinking, imagination, parallels, or all of these together. It becomes science as soon as I put rationality before instincts. Because we have to acknowledge that Jane Austen was right when she wrote that sense and sensibility will not work without each other.

It is another issue as to how different fields of study develop out of each other. I have created a new field of study in Hungary, called social policy – a doctoral school already exists in this discipline. Meanwhile, I am aware of that this is not a science in the strict sense of the word; it's more of an amalgam. Iván, you were a partner in setting this up, but many colleagues were against this. We have separated social policy from sociology, as there is specific knowledge here: from budgeting to chronic poverty and the handling of these issues, which do after all need to be taught. Sociology is not able to absorb all this. This is how we became fragmented.

Let me go back a bit to the question of crisis. I think that the role of the intelligentsia – especially of the small fragment of it engaged in the so-called human social sciences – depends on the times one lives in. In nice, peaceful times, it's better to have a mid-level type of Mertonian theory. But in times when social tensions are enormous, and one can see that the entire society, both the global and the Hungarian society, “is going somewhere” [down the slope], in such a context this bunch of people does indeed have a role, a responsibility to invent a “calling cry”: to say something

similar to what Beck has said about the “risk society”<sup>5</sup>, or what Bauman has said about the “liquid society”<sup>6</sup>, what Standing has said about precarity<sup>7</sup>, or Picketty, who works as an economist as well as a semi-sociologist, has said about the incredible role of global inequalities.<sup>8</sup>

Thus I do not know whether sociology is needed. And perhaps Iván is right that nowadays we sociologists don't have a lead role but a serving maid role. On the other hand, during the launch of our recent research report, ‘Jelentés a civil társadalomról’<sup>9</sup> (‘Report on Civil Society’), Spiró, Závada and Vekerdy<sup>10</sup> all said that no one will read this book in its original form; however, it is very important that hard social facts are collected in this report. Such facts indicate that while on the one hand the state says that it will do this and that, on the other hand, it has to a smaller or larger extent done exactly the opposite for the last twenty years. Children for instance, who are in our research focus, have less and less of a future or even a present. This report with our research findings cannot become a call for a programme on its own, but can be turned into one. Thus, sociology does have a social role, after all.

**J.D. Miklós, what do you think about all this, about the way Iván has described the current state of sociology?**

**Miklós Hadas.** I fully agree that sociology has never had (and will probably never have) such a significant position among the Western social sciences than it had in the 1960s and 1970s, when this was the science which provided the language of the legitimate discourse related to social changes. I would add that in the 1980s in Hungary (and in Poland, and partly in Czechoslovakia) sociology had a similar importance – as was sharply pointed out by Tibor Kuczi at that time. The right-wing ‘ancien regimes’ were served by a sociology based on a structuralist-functionalist, Parsonian harmony theory, which was later opposed by a conflict theory sympathetic to the political Left after the world war. Marx was on their flags, along with other reform Marxists, led by Gramsci, Althusser, and György Lukács. The most important representatives of that new generation were armed with a large ego and with theory-making ambitions, and made a significant direct or indirect impact on the political sphere – from Bourdieu to Touraine, Beck and Habermas through to Giddens.

I would emphasize that we are mostly talking about European and non-American sociologists in this context. Sociology fought a double war of independence: with philosophy (and later with economics) within the sphere of social sciences, and against the Right, in alliance with leftist parties and movements, in the political sphere. This process lasted for two or three decades, during which really significant changes took place in western societies.

<sup>5</sup> Beck, U. (1992) *Risk Society. Towards a New Modernity*. London, UK: Sage Publications.

<sup>6</sup> Bauman, Z. (2000) *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

<sup>7</sup> Standing, G. (2011) *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. London, UK: Bloomsbury.

<sup>8</sup> Picketty T. (2014) *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

<sup>9</sup> Ferge, Zs. and Á. Darvas (2014) *Civil jelentés a gyerekesélyekről, 2012-2013 (Independent Report on Children's Opportunities 2012-2013)*. Budapest: Gyerekesély Közhasznú Egyesület.

<sup>10</sup> All are well-known Hungarian public intellectuals and authors.

The European Left gained dominant positions in politics, and the notion of the welfare state could in many places become part of social practice. Just to mention the most important European states: in Germany Schmitt and his party got into power in the 70s, in France Mitterand in the 80s, and in the UK Tony Blair and his Labour rose to power in the 90s. Thus many of the demands of sociology, feeling solidarity with the Left, were realised.

At the same time - and none of you referred to this development - new sciences have emerged during this period, new epistemologies, which were sympathetic to the goals of sociology in a political sense, but which, in other respects, were also rivals to it. These were the new studies emerging out of social movements, and at the beginning took their place on the margins of the academic sphere, and later on moved to more influential academic positions. Within a relatively short time they have restructured the academic world in both an organizational and an epistemological sense. Which were these new studies? For instance postcolonial studies, gender studies, cultural studies, and minority studies, which represented and legitimised previously peripheral, subaltern forms and positions of knowledge against the still dominant holistic vision of the masculine, upper-middle class, heteronormative, mostly unreflective viewpoint of the conflict theory- inspired sociology of the 1960s and 70s.

**F.Zs.** Do you think that these have all become sociologies in recent years?

**M.H.** I don't think that they are all sociology, because if we look at what these new studies feed on and learn from than we can see that there are many references other than sociology. Among them there are interpretive anthropology, the deconstructionism of Derrida, the philosophy of Heidegger, literary theory, structuralist linguistics, semiology, and so on, not to mention that one needs to consider the cross-references among the new studies too.

**Zs.F.** But you can find all this in the discipline of sociology.

**M.H.** Maybe yes, maybe not, but nevertheless there is a shift: conflict theory sociology has been losing its academic and social significance since the beginning of the 80s. Obviously it has to do with the growing importance of a modern social science: the rise of economics, which is indicated by the increasing significance of rational choice theory within sociology, alongside the institutionalization of the neo-functionalism backlash - let's just think of the increase in popularity of J. C. Alexander, Boudon or Luhmann!

**J.D.** I think what you say is very important. Iván talked about mainstream sociology, but these non-mainstream 'studies' have reformed sociology a lot. And I think good students are enrolled in departments for these other studies. At least in the UK where I am familiar with the situation.

**M.H.** What I have just tried to articulate is that social sciences are not in crisis at all; the power relations have merely been restructured. Some new viewpoints,

approaches, methodologies and reflected epistemologies have emerged and become resynthesized; these were partly present in sociology earlier, but with less emphasis. And these new disciplines have played an important role in challenging the illusions of the quasi-scientific measuring of causal relationships (illusions which are still present in American sociology, dominated as it is by quantitative methods), and they have presented alternative knowledge-producing techniques as legitimate, too.

Let me get personal for a moment! I don't think that we can speak in a genuine way without being personal and self-reflexive. Many of us social scientists feel that we need to reflect upon our situational embeddedness, on the position from where we speak, and on the framework of reference and system of embeddedness which can be contextualized as a legitimate knowledge horizon for our statements about scientific truth. I had to realize during my career that though I define myself as a sociologist first of all, and I have worked in the same sociology department for the last thirty years, I would feel uneasy if I had to identify only with this discipline. Because I am also a gender researcher, I deal with the theory of sociology, the sociology of science, sociology of sports and am interested in cultural phenomena in the widest sense, but I am also open to qualitative methodologies used by anthropology, and all this, as a follower of Norbert Elias, I try to do from a long-term figurational historical perspective. And I am proud that once, when a text of mine appeared in BUKSZ [Budapest Review of Books], the editors put after my name "Miklós Hadas, historian".

I would rather put it this way: we feel that sociology is in crisis if we insist on its old identity, the image we formed of sociology in the 60s and 70s. But if we accept that there is an interdisciplinary realignment taking place, and that accordingly we have to position social sciences and within them sociology in a new way, then we can consider it necessary that the importance of our discipline has decreased. I think it is exactly in this context that as a dean, Iván considers it reasonable to start not a sociology department but a department of social research and public policy in Abu Dhabi. I consider an academic and his knowledge interesting if they don't lock themselves up in the ivory tower of their discipline acquired at a young age, but is capable of creating a new subdiscipline (like science studies, for instance), in some situations with the necessary flexibility, reflecting on the changes of their era, and absorbing and implementing elements of other studies and disciplines. To me, Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway and Michael Foucault belong to this 'interesting academics' category.

**J.D.** In this context, where can we place Hungarian sociology? How do you see it: are we really on the semi-periphery or periphery? As we know, twenty years ago in *Replika* there were voices claiming that the mainstream uses Hungary for brain drain, and in terms of data, this region, Eastern Europe, is a goldmine. Meanwhile did we manage to change our position towards the mainstream? Did we succeed in achieving autonomy or partnership instead of 'colonized victimhood' as described earlier?

**I.Sz.** I leave it to my colleagues to decide. I would only add in general, but with a huge generalization, that the curiosity about our region has dropped significantly. In the 60s it was extremely interesting, because it was not known where this socialism was

heading to. From Zagreb to Budapest, from Warsaw to Prague, it seemed that development led to a more human form of socialism, which enormously excited our colleagues in the West, and the best people came here to study the situation. Transitology also brought some kind of interest, though the biggest players in transitology came from the American academy. But even transitology has ceased to exist by now. In the 90s perhaps there was still something, but practically it was already a dying field. What should I say, if it were not for this small issue of Putin or Orbán, the whole subject would have lost its significance. Putin is interesting because it seems that maybe things are not fully resolved, and thus they might give some money to research Putin...

**M.H.** And his clones.

**I.Sz.** So something will happen again. Putin invented an interesting new game in 2000. He has reset the agenda of transitology.

**M.H.** Iván mentioned how we appear as a [research] subject in an international context. But if we are talking about ourselves as academics hailing from Eastern Europe and about our position in the international scholarly world, we can report about positive developments, too. I think Hungarian sociology can be considered a normally functioning semi-peripheral western sociology, unlike the period twenty years ago, when without any doubt we were only part of the periphery. Now there are already researchers from Hungary, my former students among them, who were able to integrate into the Western academic world and become full members of it. There are also those, and I would mention József Böröcz first of all, who were able to take their unique position of knowledge, which in a global sense comes from their peripheral embeddedness, and succeed in making it the central part of their oeuvre. Böröcz found the structural homologies which exist between Hungarian semi-peripheral and the Indian, Far-East and Latin-American semi-peripheral situations.<sup>11</sup> Thus we possess that *diferencia específica* from where we can raise questions which could be homologous to the Indian subaltern or the viewpoint of immigrants in France. We also have excellent young researchers who already do their research from this new, interdisciplinary position, impregnated by many different studies. I think a particularly strong generation is beginning its career right now in Hungary, whose members are already the students of our generation. They are fully equipped with the 'language capital', the abilities, skills, and the theoretical and methodological knowledge necessary for an international career.

**Zs.F.** For me the important question is what (Hungarian) sociology wants? Does it want to tell something to Hungary, about Hungary, or to get some Hungarian viewpoint accepted in the world?

The key problem is the language. It is an enormous problem. Iván has perhaps already got to the point, and you too, Judit and Miklós, where you say what you want

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<sup>11</sup> Böröcz, J. (2009) *The European Union and Global Social Change: A Critical Geopolitical and Economic Analysis*. London, UK and New York, NY: Routledge.

to say in English. I say in English what I can express in English. And still, I do speak English. But look at, say, Ági Losonczi, whom I consider one of the most original Hungarian sociologists. She is the only one who has dealt with that specific issue of what has happened to people here in the last few decades. No one even knows her name outside Hungary.

**J.D.** I would like to add only one thought, and I will be interested in your opinions. I consider it positive that London (UCL, Goldsmiths, King's College) is full of Eastern European anthropologists from Romania, Slovakia, Hungary, the Czech Republic, who all communicate well in English. During one of our workshops, Keith Hart, the well-known economic anthropologist, who coined the term 'informal economy', told me something interesting. He said that he is not interested in the Roma in research about usury, let's say, or other economic anthropology studies, because they are only an individual group (from a scientific point of view). Rather, he is much more interested in the theoretical relevance of studies related to the Roma: for instance, their contribution to one of the central questions of economic anthropology, the problem of precarity. He is interested in what solutions the researched group can offer to this problem. So these young East European anthropologists are already writing for an international (academic) audience. But here I think the fundamental question is Zsuzsa's one, namely who the audience for these texts is.

**M.H.** Recently I have followed the strategy that I write my texts in English, and if required I translate them to Hungarian. Let me tell you what we are working on right now, as it is relevant to our topic here: we are preparing a very interesting Norbert Elias special issue with British colleagues for the sociological journal 'Erdélyi Társadalom' ('Transylvanian Society') from Cluj [Romania]. Globally relevant knowledge appears in it, for instance in the study written by Judit Durst, where she analyses the social exclusion of Hungarian Roma immigrant communities in both the Canadian and the UK contexts, and their in-group relationships according to the 'the established and the outsiders' theory of Norbert Elias. We feel a mission to point out the opportunities hidden in Elias's works to our colleagues at home, because he is a relatively under-interpreted author in Hungarian sociology.

And just very briefly about my own position, which is also an answer to your question, but a sad answer. In this special issue, my paper on the gender relevance of the Eliasian civilising process theory is written from a position in which it can't be identified that the author is Hungarian, because I try to answer such universal questions about the long-term process of Western type gender order where it becomes irrelevant if the author is Hungarian, Spanish or apparently British. And my illusion is that this way I can influence different academic areas in an inspiring way.

**J.D.** This is a clear position. Now I ask Iván: what kind of audience are you writing for? I would be glad if you would reflect on your own oeuvre. What do you consider important in your work?

**I.Sz.** When I went to New York, I insisted that they give me the title of professor of social sciences. By the way they gave me a name too, which I very modestly requested to be that of Max Weber Professor of Social Sciences.

I am a Weberian infected by Marxism. In this sense I have always practiced interpretive sociology throughout my life, because I cannot do anything else. Well, sometimes I did some number crunching too. Mostly, I need some support to do this. But I like it when data is available, otherwise... Eric Olin Wright said that there is this bullshit Marxism from which he wants to distance himself. I also try to keep myself at a distance from, put a bit crudely, bullshit sociology, which is not working on the basis of data. Which is not data sensitive.

**J.D.** What is bullshit sociology?

**I.Sz.** Simple: if one is not ready to tell me under what circumstances he is willing to 'accept defeat', what kind of data do I have to show that he accepts he was wrong.

**J.D.** Miklós, what is your opinion of this? I ask it specifically in the context of Michael Burawoy's call for public sociology.<sup>12</sup>

**M.H.** In connection with the 'public sociology' debate, my impression was that the North American science-based tradition from which Burawoy speaks to announce his programme of public sociology is very far from the European model, where the ethos of science was always based on non-falsifiable, speculative statements, and in which the idea of social science and the responsibility of social scientists as public intellectuals could peacefully coexist. In this respect I consider Jürgen Habermas a typical character who produces speculative mega-narratives, but who finds it important that he should react to everything that happens in society and politics with self-reflection as a public intellectual and as a public academic. Let me also briefly refer to Pierre Bourdieu! I consider his self-reflexive project a failure. In what is practically his last work, entitled '*Science de la science et réflexivité*',<sup>13</sup> he writes about the requirement of self-reflection as a normative *ars poetica* – not just for himself, but for every sociologist. I find the last part of this book, where he tries to analyse his own career, highly debatable. In my opinion here the self-reflexion unfortunately turns into self-apology.

**J.D.** Zsuzsa, what do you think about this 'scientific' question, and that of who the audience for your work is?

**Zs.F.** In sociology, if we look at it from an interest point of view, there are two roads. One is when I try to implement what I am saying internationally, to get into an international circle of scholars and achieve some sort of recognition. Whether with the hope of belonging to a recognized group of my choice, or perhaps with the hope

<sup>12</sup> Burawoy, M. (2005) For Public Sociology. *American Sociological Review*, 70 (1): 4-28.

<sup>13</sup> Bourdieu, P. (2001) *Science de la science et réflexivité (Science of Science and Reflexivity)*. Paris: Éditions Raison d'agir.

that they will invite me to Harvard as a visiting lecturer, or that they accept me as an international authority – it doesn't really matter here.

And there is the other route, which I represented with Ági Losonczy. Maybe it is no accident that I did not stay abroad, either here or there. I am only interested in Hungary, which tried to kill me, throw me out, and isn't too nice to me now, either.

True, I got involved in a few international research projects. There was a research project with five countries on social policy after the change of the regime in 1989. I like comparative international research. But what I am more interested in is what is happening here in Hungarian society. And if I look at it, I don't care if I mix into my researches and my explanations of my research findings various theories from other disciplines such as history or social psychology or any other conceptual framework which I have access to.

I'm not interested in how many pieces they will tear sociology apart into. I think this tearing apart happens when some personal interests are at stake. Gender studies and these various other studies – are these sub-branches of what we call sociology in a wider sense? Or completely separate disciplines? I don't know.

**I.Sz.** I believe we handled this issue at UCLA very well. Gender studies is important, Asian American studies is terribly important, and Native American studies is also very important. We called them interdisciplinary instructional programs. These were not departments in their own right, since they do not have their own discipline. A discipline is something which has its own theory and methodology. So if someone was appointed here, they would have to have a tenure- home in one of the disciplines but that person did most of his/her teaching and at least some of his/her research within this interdisciplinary instructions programme. I find this a perfect solution.

**M.H.** I would like to add that there are two extremely important new elements in the emergence of *other studies*. One is that the given study – gender, postcolonial, cultural – tries to research things from a certain perspective, an alternative knowledge position which was previously the viewpoint of the subaltern (women, colonised people, members of minority groups, etc), and thus the oppressed point of view. The second new element is that during the institutionalization of this new epistemological position these studies have stepped out from the nationally embedded viewpoint which – as Zsuzsa has also suggested – most traditionally educated sociologists identify with. So it is not simply that gender studies or cultural studies are interdisciplinary fields but also that these new disciplines are able to grasp the slight differences and cultural variations of globalization, which sociology, constructing its research subject from its own national context, was less able to do.

**Zs.F.** Sorry to interrupt you, Miklós, but if we look at the Roma poor, is that a new sociology? Because the same kind of change of viewpoint takes place there.

**M.H.** Not really, because when Hungarian sociology – unlike anthropology – deals with the Roma, it does it usually not from the Roma point of view but from the macro perspective of social inequalities and stratification. But there is no doubt that recently, like in your own child poverty-related project in Szécsény, the Roma point of view has

become more significant. Thus, the cognitive position of the subaltern becomes increasingly legitimate in disciplines grounded in modernity, and thus in sociology, too.

**Zs.F.** I would raise one more thing related to what Miklós said earlier, namely how it is when in-depth research constrained to one country can take us to generalized concepts and models. A textbook example is Elias' work on Mozart, where he writes only about Mozart, but it ultimately tells us about how a given social time, social space and social relations enable the specific emergence of a genius. And he manages to make a general theory out of this particular case.

Another example is Bourdieu who knows "nothing else" except France and Algeria, but the concepts which he develops out of these cases are ones that can be useful for many of us scholars. And there are other widely-known concepts developed by "classic" sociologists, like Marx's class struggle, Weber's legitimacy concept, and so on. I can also use concepts like 'field' or 'habitus' from Bourdieu.

I would just add about sociology that I do not really mind how it is called, but it has to deal with questions which are relevant from the point of view of social relations. Burawoy's public sociology made this a basic issue. I am not sure how I personally relate to it because it has so many meanings. One meaning is whether it is worth filling up all those not widely read and utterly boring American sociology journals with a variety of cluster analyses? Or whether it is worth shouting demagogue things on television as Bourdieu shouted in his last years.

**J.D. Zsuzsa, what does this expression of public sociology mean to you?**

**Zs.F.** It means that as a social researcher I feel a responsibility towards society and try to exercise it according to my means. However, as I try to write articles understandable for lay people and to get them published in different media, I have slightly distanced myself from the right to be called a social scientist. A scientist does not do such things. On the contrary, I think a researcher can do such things. Of course one cannot always be engaged in public sociology as a sociologist, because it is impossible not to go into deeper and deeper layers, into more complex approaches. Also, if you don't have new professional research findings, you have nothing to 'popularize'.

**J.D.** I think all three of you have become more and more engaged in public sociology. Miklós publishes his articles in the popular media, and Iván writes more and more journalistic pieces, not to mention Zsuzsa. You all took up the role of translator/interpreter and I think this is a positive development. But I know it is a matter of individual judgement.

**I.Sz.** Let me tell you something about Burawoy, because I know his work well, and I know him as well. He is a close friend. I will try to be brief. One should not forget that Michael is a revolutionary Marxist- Leninist. For him the role of social sciences is to increase people's awareness and to help them establish a better world. He is inspired by Gramsci. When he converts this into public sociology as the president of the

American Sociological Society, he softens it so that it becomes acceptable to non-revolutionary Marxists and it provides a programme which says, OK, maybe it is not socialism which we have to build.

I am also committed to critical theory. I also like to write in a way understandable to the public, though I do not always succeed in this. No wonder I do not get into the American Sociological Review or the American Journal of Sociology too often. But I think that since 1989 there has not been an Archimedean point from critical social science like what socialism used to be. There is no good society. Thus irony is the main tool of critical research for me. It comes from Socrates of course, and I think a bit along the lines of Nietzsche and Foucault. It means that my role is not necessarily to tell people what they should do. Michael Burawoy thinks that we, social researchers, can find out and we can help people to understand what they should do.

**J.D. That this should be the role of public sociology?**

**I.Sz.** Yes, indeed. But I think this is not my job. My role is simply to implant some action alternatives into people's heads so that they are not under the impression that this is the only thing they can do.

I think my role is to ask questions and to ask "are you certain about this?" "Couldn't you do something else?" By the way this is an ancient thought, so to speak. Weber did the same. The task of social sciences is not to tell people what to do but to indicate what they might do.

**J.D. Zsuzsa, if I understand right, for you or for Miklós, Burawoy doesn't say very new things, because he is banging on open doors. This is essentially what you have been doing for the last fifty years.**

**Zs.F.** And I try to do it independently of any doctrines. This is what you have to do, as Iván just explained.

**I.Sz.** Just to add one more thing. Loic Wacquant's critic of ethnography is a parallel story to Burawoy. Wacquant himself makes all the mistakes for which he is blaming other ethnographers, such as Elijah Anderson and Mitch Duneier. Both of them I consider to be giants. By the way this is a problem with Burawoy too. As we know there are two schools in anthropology. One is the Chicago School, with Howard Becker, Mitch Duneier and Elijah Anderson; the other is the Berkeley School. I find Howard Becker more convincing, because of his concept of 'Immersion'. It means that the role of ethnographers is to go into the field, to become immersed in the field, and to understand what people are doing there. And because he is a participant observer coming from outside, or observant participant as Elijah Anderson so wittily puts it, he can say something about those things which they cannot see. By the way, this kind of research also has a mobilizing effect.

**J.D.** Let us now turn back to Burawoy and his public sociology. Miklós, would you shortly summarize your criticism of this manifesto? Because you wrote a rather serious criticism of Burawoy.

**M.H.** I wrote a criticism in three parts, with the title ‘Much Ado About Nothing’. The Hungarian text appeared in *Replika*, and the English one in *American Sociologist*.<sup>14</sup> My main claim is exactly what Zsuzsa has stressed, that Burawoy in many respects bangs on open doors.

**J.D.** Can you tell us what Burawoy says, as perhaps readers don’t know exactly.

**M.H.** He wants to say what Iván just summarized so precisely! One of my main problems with this text is that it is of very low quality. In the first part of my criticism I try to prove that Burawoy’s argument is conceptually confused, inconsequential, and contradictory, because it is not really clear what he is talking about when he speaks about the different types of sociological knowledge. In the second part I develop an alternative model, where I place the work of the social scientist in a three-dimensional space. These three dimensions are: prestige, influence, and position within the chain of action, within which I distinguish between different forms of activities and epistemological positions, from the public intellectual through the university teacher to the pop sociologist. In the last part I talk about the norms which form the basis of my vocation as a social scientist.

**J.D.** What is a pop sociologist?

**M.H.** A pop sociologist is someone who formulates ungrounded statements about social issues while gaining significant media attention.

**J.D.** Is this the same as the populist sociologist?

**M.H.** Yes, you could say that. By the way, pop psychologists are much more popular, but there are pop sociologists, too, who try to make bombastic and not sufficiently supported statements about poverty, inequality, gender, sexual habits with the help of the popular media.

What I tried to say in this article on the basis of this three-dimensional space is that we need to obtain sufficient prestige in our given professional space, and then we have to try to make the biggest possible impact by using our prestige as public scientists or public intellectuals. Furthermore, we need to take part in the chain of action, based on the opportunities we have, but strictly separated from our professional activities. So let’s be activists if that’s what is required.

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<sup>14</sup> Hadas, M. (2007) “Much ado about nothing”? Remarks on Michael Burawoy’s Presidential Address. *American Sociology*, 38: 309- 322. <http://burawoy.berkeley.edu/PS/TAS2/Hadas.pdf> Accessed: 18-06-2015.

Hadas, M. (2006) Sok hűhó semmiért. Burawoy esete a szociológiával (Much Ado about Nothing. Burroway’s Case with Sociology). *Replika* (56-57): 229-244.

Now, what does it mean to be public sociologists or public intellectuals? Exactly what Zsuzsa has just mentioned. Let us attempt to speak not only to our scholar colleagues. Let's fight against the trashy pop sociologists. Let's take part in public debates, let's acquire some room for ourselves in the public space. Let take opportunities to get invited on television or radio. Let's publish articles in newspapers. And let's hold 'Introduction to sociology' type lectures for non-sociologists.

At the same time, let us not tell people what to do, because we are not in that position. But let's choose topics, research topics, and here I go back to Weber, which is of outstanding social significance from that cognitive position, where we stand. And indeed, let's become activists. But let us separate our activism from our professional activities.

**J.D.** A well-formulated position... And why, as a gender researcher, are you interested in the Roma issue? Why are you becoming active in this area which you have not researched previously?

**M.H.** I don't define myself exclusively as a gender researcher. I consider myself a social scientist. However, as a social scientist, I am embedded in various ways and have a broad range of interests. Currently, as I mentioned earlier, my main research topic goes beyond the Hungarian context and concentrates on long-term historical changes. But as a Hungarian citizen, mostly living and working in Hungary, I think it is my duty to convert the knowledge I possess into practice. If you want, it is a matter of conscience for me to use my knowledge and energies for the benefit of the public. Following this imperative, two and a half years ago I established the so-called *Katalizátor Hálózat* ('Catalyst Network'), where I work as an activist with my academic and NGO colleagues, friends and allies, and try to help in discovering and establishing synergies between state, church, market, and civil initiatives, all aiming at treating chronic poverty in Hungary - especially among Roma.

**J.D.** Thank you, you have summarized this very well. Iván, it's your turn! What do you consider your role as a sociologist to be? Is the role of the public intellectual important for you? What about the role of university lecturer? Perhaps that's the most important one. Once you said that if they ask what your profession is on an aeroplane, you reply that you are a teacher. And it seems you also find the role of the translator to be important, as you publish in newspapers quite a lot.

**I.Sz.** I think my role is to write down and also to say what I see, in the most precise way possible. Kolakowski had his typology of the intelligentsia; he wrote this at the beginning of the 60s. According to him one of these roles is the role of the court clown who spells out things which no one else dares to say. Neither the priest nor the academic can say these things. The court clown is the only one who is allowed to tell jokes which can actually hurt. I see myself in this role of the court jester, with the right amount of self-irony.

**J.D.** Can the role of jester accommodate the role of the activist?

**I.Sz.** No.

**J.D.** You have never taken up the role of the activist. Why not?

**I.Sz.** I just tell jokes, and the audience either laughs at it or it doesn't. I am an Orthodox Weberian in this sense. I believe that scholarship and politics are two different vocations. As a private person I can become a politician, but the question is whether I will misuse the power which comes from my academic position or not.

**M.H.** But Weber took part in politics; he was active.

**I.Sz.** Yes, indeed. It was quite a big problem that he got involved in politics. He made a lot of bad moves in politics. And he also had that foolishness about the charismatic leader. If he had kept it on an analytic level, it would have been better...

**J.D.** Zsuzsa, do you see the role of the academic and civil 'activist' as compatible?

**Zs.F.** Every question is an intervention - what Iván calls subversion. I enter someone's life and, by stepping in, I do something there, and it leaves all kinds of trace. Alternatives open up, there is a flash. Some time ago we thought that it was absolutely forbidden to act on the basis of invoked solidarity. From all of our 'investigative' interviews we came back frustrated at the beginning of the 60s. You went inside the home of a Roma family, their chronic poverty was revealed, you discussed with them how things are, and then you were tempted to leave them a hundred forints, otherwise they will die of hunger, but you couldn't. It would have been against (scientifically codified) ethics to start practicing charity as actors. There was an incredible wall between our real action and our symbolic aggression. This has visibly softened by now.

I believe I am somewhere in-between Miklós and Iván. I think, until the change of regime, my role was what Iván has just described, that of critical investigation. Since the change of regime, as the three big actors in the power structure, the market, the state, and civil society, have started to function more freely, the situation has become slightly different. The market is allowed to do anything, the state is as it is, and then it is the role of civil society to nudge both to do something different. Thus since then I am much more like a civil actor, and, likewise, my works, as far as they can be called academic, are also related to civil society, discussing what can be done to make things less bad.

I am fine with doing less science and being more active in more civil organizations. When for five to six years I led the Szécsény social experiment intended to improve chances for children, I was more a bystander with the eye of a researcher than an actor. The 'real' work - in children's homes, after-school programmes (*tanoda*), at IT points, with families - was done by knowledgeable professionals. I am not expert at fieldwork. What I know is observation, summarizing

empirical findings, and I considered my role to synchronize work, to interpret field experiences and to generalise them.

**J.D.** Now, let me ask you the last question. Who is your audience? Who do you write for? Is it important for the world of politics to listen to you? Does it matter to you whether NGOs use your research findings? So that there is some public use for all the work you invest into your academic exercises – or is it enough for you if four-five people, your colleagues, read your papers? Obviously I am talking about the two extremes.

**Zs.F.** Let us reverse the question. Naturally, I would be glad if (other than scientific recognition, which of course I also long for) what I try to say would reach many people. The Internet is an especially good tool for this. Obviously, the message has to be composed accordingly, to make it understandable, so that it gets through. I have a grandson who is among the ‘young revolutionaries’ (they have for instance established the ‘Hallgatói Hálózat’ [Students’ Network]), and is an Internet expert. He checks what reaches whom for me. My writings in the newspaper *Népszabadság*<sup>15</sup> are read by, say, 14 thousand people, while the same thing posted on Facebook is read by many more.

Regarding politics. Foreign journalists came and asked my colleagues about poverty. My colleagues explained the situation. The journalists responded: OK, but two weeks back we visited your minister and your state secretary, and they said exactly the opposite. So how does this work?! My colleagues asked them why they did not invite the politicians along. The journalists replied that they tried, but the minister said that they would not sit down and talk with professionals.

**I.Sz.** I am going to tell you something terribly banal, but let me start first with an anecdote. I had a dear friend; he has already passed away, a son of a businessman from Brooklyn, who studied sociology at university. His father asked him what the hell this sociology was. He tried to explain with this and with that, but the old man did not understand. Then the father says, aha, now I’ve got it. You want to be a *do-gooder*. And he says, my son, if you want to be a do-gooder, why don’t you open your shop first, earn lots of money, and then you can do good. Now, I am not a do-gooder. And here comes the terrible banality, the self-justifying, moralizing bullshit. I claim that, interestingly enough, social sciences have the opportunity morally to justify what they do, if they so wish. My concern is to give voice to those who do not have a voice. This was already written by Peter Berger in 1964. I always agreed with this. This is a nice way out, as I do not have to say that I am a good man and that’s why I deal with those whom the society mistreats; instead I can say that I do so because it is more interesting.

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<sup>15</sup> One of the most read Hungarian daily newspapers.

**J.D.** I see... Miklós, what is your *ars poetica*?

**M.H.** It's difficult to answer that, because there is no straight answer. I agree with Virginia Woolf that our personality is extremely complex, thus our personality layers are built on each other like trays in a waiter's hands. Perhaps the easiest answer would be that what I write or do is the result of an urge for self-expression, of a Narcissistic projection. It means that my need for self-reflection, which is there inside me regarding my social environment in a wider sense of the word, is searching for opportunities to break out. I tried my hand at many areas during my life: as a person dealing with music and theatre, the artistic world seemed to me the most comfortable realm - until I reached thirty. So I could be flippant and say that I have been dealing with certain things and topics to meet my own intellectual needs - but this wouldn't be precisely true.

**J.D.** I think this is very true indeed. And important.

**M.H.** Very important, but I have changed a lot in the last thirty years.

**J.D.** And along with that your research topics have changed, too.

**M.H.** This kind of public responsibility, which occasionally culminates in activism - which, by the way, I do not consider as something compulsory for all, and I fully respect the opinion of 99 per cent of my colleagues who do not want to become activists - comes from my personal habitus that I like to generate conflict, to go out and resist. This is a sort of macho disposition in me, which I do try to practice with sufficient self-reflection. Nevertheless, I consider 'The Birth of the Modern Man' (*Modern férfi születése*) as my most important book. I write it for an audience of social scientists with the hope that it will be used by sociologists, anthropologists and historians. And certain things, like my appearances as a public sociologist or public intellectual, are for the society or context to whom I am expressing myself. And this is not merely the Hungarian context. I also have works like 'Sex and Revolution' (*Szex és forradalom*), a short book of ten monologues on sexuality, or a co-publication with Gyula Zeke 'The Life of a Useless Man' (*Fölösleges ember élete*) which are meant for a broader audience. My appearances as a public sociologist or public intellectual always correspond to an actual social context. And I want to emphasize that this context is not restricted to Hungary.

**J.D.** Thank you Miklós. And Zsuzsa, what about your selection of topics, where do they come from? Or, I could also ask, how is your personal *habitus*, your life history, present in your work? Why are you always researching inequalities? You mentioned earlier that this is your permanent topic, and all that changes is the angle you look at it from...

**Zs.F.** Look, all such answers are arbitrary. I believe that there is always a personal history element behind every topic selection. I had a relatively protected childhood. Then another period came, when I was a pariah at high school and then in France,

too, where I did not speak French, at a secondary school in Versailles, which was a rich, middle-class lycée. I was a Hungarian in a society which does not like foreigners. And a Jew in a context where Jews were a minority.

But as a woman I have never suffered any inequality. I never faced gender injustice, I never experienced this feeling of oppression. But I did experience poverty, and the misery emerging from having a minority status. I believe the whole inequality problem grew out of this. But this is only half of the story.

The other half is my family background. I come from a leftist community, and this worked in such a way that when I reached Paris I had to start dealing with the Paris commune and its attached parts. The family was penetrated with the ideology of the French revolution, so it was relatively easy for me to turn towards this topic. Thus I think that with this beginning, its predispositions and philosophy, and my own life experiences, when everyone had already been killed, and so on, I ended up in a triple inequality. These were most likely all defining factors for my academic topics.

**J.D.** Thank you. Iván?

**I.Sz.** Well, I think questions come from theory. Which field of investigation do I choose, what questions do I ask, which phenomena do I study: these are not accidental, but guided by theory.

**J.D.** But where does the theory come from which interests you? Where does the choice of topic come from?

**I.Sz.** Well, I somehow believe that an interesting or valid theory is what I try to navigate with. I would only add that I am not particularly attracted to the habitus of the social scientist who is overly occupied with their self-importance, and who tries to reify their own theories. In other words, the scholar who tends to mould the data so as to justify the theory.

**Zs.F.** Forgive me for interjecting, Iván, but when you started to look at urban development with ghettoization and segregation at its centre, you did not have any theoretical choice, you were driven by social outrage.

**I.Sz.** Yes. I was interested in that topic. Why I was interested in it, it is difficult to say. For sure, I believed that it was a relevant thing, that it had social relevance. So it was interesting.

**Zs.F.** If you look at your own life, it was full of various situations which made you sensitive to this kind of thinking.

**I.Sz.** Yes and no. You know, all through my life I was very fortunate. I was born with a silver spoon in my mouth.

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**J.D.** So you are saying that it is purely intellectual interest that leads you.

**I.Sz.** Yes. I used to ask, what motivates me. The fact that I am curious. And what am I curious about? I am curious about things which do not have a straightforward answer.

**J.D.** A great many things do not have a straightforward answer.

**I.Sz.** Yes. I am mostly interested in the oppressed, the exploited, because they do not know enough to understand the mechanisms of their exploitation and oppression.

**J.D.** Miklós, would you reflect on this last question, of what influences your choice of topics?

**M.H.** In my case the influence of one's life history and self-reflection is very important. I can say that during my whole life I dealt with those things which were important for me as a teenager or a youngster. Though with a certain time shift. As a teenager, I was a musician and a sports person, and later on as a sociologist I reflected on this.

This has since shifted towards a wider social responsibility and larger topics, where the experience of my own masculinity has played an important mediating role. Here I had to face the fact of what a nasty, petty and sexist man I was. If you like, in a certain sense I still apologize for this, because I can see that I committed many sins against women, as I lived and thought the way those macho men whom I now so strongly condemn.

**J.D.** Thank you very much for the discussion. For me, it was very exciting and instructive – and I hope our readers will feel the same way.

Translated by Zsuzsa Árendás