

The Impact of Social and Cultural Theories on Historical Approaches to the European Public Sphere, Culture and Politics

Veranstalter: Berliner Kolleg für Vergleichende Geschichte Europas, Berlin in cooperation with Central European University, Department of History, Budapest. Supported by Gemeinnützige Hertie-Stiftung (Frankfurt am Main), Pastis, Inc. Center for Historical Studies (Budapest)

Datum, Ort: 28.11.2005-29.11.2005, Berlin

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What is the role of theory in the study and analysis of the past? How can historians combine theory with the practice of empirical research? Twenty doctoral candidates and nine scholars affiliated with the Berliner Kolleg für Vergleichende Geschichte Europas (BKVGE) and the Department of History at Central European University (CEU) held a two-day conference, the third such collaboration between the two institutions, in order to consider these questions.¹

In their opening remarks, Sorin Antohi (CEU) and Jürgen Kocka (BKVGE) suggested that historians are still not actively engaged enough with theory. More specifically, Antohi pointed out that scholars from other disciplines often find the study of history to be undertheorized and that even the view from within the field reveals that a deep cleavage between theory and practice has yet to be overcome. Hence, Kocka urged historians to rediscover the virtues and usefulness of theory in order to develop hypotheses, sharpen their research questions and reflect on their own role in the examination and writing of history. Addressing aspects of each individual's dissertation research, the papers demonstrated that today's students of history are indeed seeking to utilize theory in their work. Furthermore, the presenters went beyond merely discussing the impact theory has had on the analysis of their own topics; they underscored the point that their primary source research can also be brought to bear on the concepts and theories they employ.

Over the course of the two days, discussants drew upon a variety of conceptual and theoretical approaches ranging from Michel Foucault's

concept of governmentality (Christiane Reinecke, BKVGE) to Thomas Kuhn's notion of scientific communities (Bogdan Iacob, CEU). But, as Antohi remarked at the beginning of the proceedings, the theories, concepts and methods that historians (and all the presenters) apply to the study of the past have originated in other academic disciplines. There exist very few, if any, theoretical and conceptual approaches that are endogenous to historical studies, and this dependence on exogenous theories can pose a number of challenges to historians. Consequently, Kocka raised a question that would become a central matter for the remainder of the conference: What do historians need to do to adapt theories and concepts from other fields to the task of historical analysis? This issue was further problematized by a debate about whether historians should even attempt to modify theories and models from outside of the social sciences and humanities. A disagreement arose, for instance, concerning Marijana Jakimova's (BKVGE) use of the concept of „mental maps“. While Antohi thought the application of a cognitive science model to the study of the past was misplaced, Bernhard Struck (BKVGE) supported the efforts of historians to draw on theories and models from a wide range of disciplines. However, there was one solution to the problem of using exogenous theories that garnered wide support among the participants. Arnd Bauerkämper (BKVGE) and others repeatedly emphasized that historians should always historicize the concepts and terms they employ to carry out historical analysis. Historians cannot simply take the concepts and terms of theories and models at face value, but must understand and use them in accordance with the historical context under investigation.

This task of historicization is precisely what a number of papers did with reference to the Habermasian concept of the public sphere. These presenters borrowed ideas of the public sphere and publicness from Habermas as a means to analyze their subject matters; nonetheless, they challenged and reworked Habermas's theory by reinterpreting its concepts and terms according to the specific time and place of their research. Acknowledging the usefulness of such concepts as the public sphere and representative publicity, those researching the early modern period mounted a challenge to the developmental model Habermas laid out in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Hence, for Emese Balint (CEU), trial re-

¹For the full program see: <http://web.fu-berlin.de/bkvge/ImpactSocial4.pdf>

ords and witness depositions from the late 1500s illustrated the multiplicity of publics in existence at that time, as well as the ambiguous boundaries between public and private spheres. In his analysis of the hierarchical and exclusive nature of academic societies of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century London, Paris and Berlin, Sebastian Kühn (BKVGE) on the other hand highlighted the extent to which Habermas idealized the early modern coffee houses, salons and academies as places where free, rational and public debate encouraged the emergence of the public sphere.

Furthermore, presenters working on postwar history also contested the notion of a singular public sphere or public, while pointing to the ways in which the application of Habermas's concepts to modern non-democratic, non-bourgeois societies complicates our understandings of what can constitute the public sphere. To what extent can one really speak about (independent) public spheres and discourses, asked Philipp Ther (EUV Frankfurt/O.), when the state imposes its control on public life? For example, Nikolai Voukov (CEU) explored how the post-1945 creation of a new special dead by communist regimes enabled these governments to transform the public sphere in Eastern Europe in a way that celebrated and legitimized the Party and the new socialist order. Friederike Kind and Christian Dominitz (both ZZP Potsdam) identified the segregation and coexistence of official and dissent discourses and spheres in their respective projects on the emergence of a „communicative sphere“ between Eastern European dissidents and the „West“ following the Helsinki Final Act and on the materialization of a „hybrid sphere“ in East Germany, Poland and Czechoslovakia during the 1980s. Thus, the speakers engaged in a dialogue with Habermas's work, and as Zsuzsanna Török (CEU) put it in her commentary, did not regard Habermas's model as the bible but as theoretical inspiration.

The research on and discussions of what is „public“ also led many discussants to deconstruct the dichotomy of public versus private. In a highly theoretical piece critiquing feminist work on multiculturalism, Anna Loufti (CEU) called for the elimination of the distinction between private and public altogether, which prompted an animated debate about the usefulness of such binaries as an approach to historical analysis. By attempting to uncover the particular meanings of „public“ and „private“ within a particular historical context, presen-

ters showed that such a binary can indeed provide a useful framework for the study of topics as diverse as the power relationships between the literati and their patrons in early seventeenth-century Hungary (Vincze Orsolya, CEU) or Ottoman women's history (Hasmik Khalapyan, CEU). However, these papers also provided a more nuanced understanding of these terms by emphasizing the fluidity and ambiguity of their definitions. For Anca Sincan (CEU), the cooption of the Romanian Orthodox Church by the communist regime and the state's failed efforts at privatization of Neoprotestant denominations demonstrate that religion never left the public sphere or public discourse in communist Romania. She not only pointed to the blurred boundaries between public and private, but also convincingly challenged the liberal and Marxist versions of the secularization theory, which maintain that privatization of religion entails secularization.

In addition, discussion of the public sphere and dichotomies prompted participants to question the binary opposition between inclusion and exclusion. Through their examination of what Dieter Gosewinkel (Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung) termed „regimes of citizenship rights“, Reinecke, Stephanie Schlesier and Benno Gammerl (both BKVGE) focused on the instability and flexibility of categories of exclusion and inclusion. As Schlesier indicated in her work on Jewish emancipation in France and Prussia at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries, the exclusion of Jews from citizenship did not preclude their inclusion in the economy, while the eventual legal inclusion of Jews as citizens of the state did not overcome their social exclusion. By historicizing the concepts of exclusion and inclusion, her paper thus emphasized how the meaning of these terms continuously changed and how historical actors experienced inclusion and exclusion simultaneously. And, in his examination of citizenship and nationality in the British and Austro-Hungarian Empires, Gammerl revealed the existence of numerous in-between states in which individuals were neither full citizens nor aliens. Gammerl's usage of French post-structuralism to discuss these in-between statuses prompted Gosewinkel to ask whether the logic of the dichotomy of exclusion and inclusion should be replaced by differentiation. Seeking a middle ground, Gammerl proposed that the dichotomy should not be completely supplanted by differentiation; rather,

the historian should combine both approaches to identify the various types and degrees of inclusion and exclusion.

This approach both to historicize and to deconstruct extended beyond the critique of traditional theoretical dichotomies. Most presentations deconstructed geographic borders by utilizing a comparative approach. All of these papers therefore touched upon the last major methods discussed at the conference: the impact of comparative and transnational approaches on historical analysis. While some speakers used comparison to dispute traditional interpretations of a subject or to blur boundaries, other papers utilized the comparative approach to stress the distinctiveness of certain places. Rudolf Kučera (BKVGE) compared the relationships between old and new elites in Vienna, Berlin, Prague and Wrocław in order to show that the periphery (Prague and Wrocław) was more inclusive of the new elite due to the absence of court society. Camelia Craciun's (CEU) use of comparison to highlight the uniqueness of Romanian-speaking Jewish intellectuals was questioned by Hanna Schissler (GEI/CEU) as a too narrow approach which concentrated largely on the Romanian case without widening it to a European perspective. Indeed, for Kocka, a strictly comparative approach to the past seemed unsatisfactory. He argued that historians should attempt to identify both the points of comparison and entanglement when looking at transborder phenomena. In other words, a transnational approach, such as those employed by Dominitz, Kind and Khalapyan, should complement the attempts to identify similarities and differences between countries.

The diversity of topics being pursued by the presenters, as well as the variety of applications and reconceptualizations of methods and concepts, led participants throughout the conference to reflect generally about the current practice of history. What became increasingly apparent to the presenters and discussants over the course of the two days was that a generational difference existed in terms of the types of questions asked about the past and the approaches used to answer them. During their commentaries, Kocka stated that he regretted that most historians today seek to answer the question of „how“ rather than the question of „why“. Antohi said that he was disappointed that grand theory and grand questions had disappeared, and Schissler criticized some of the papers for being too timid in their theoretical approach. In respon-

se, Gammerl and Struck pointed out that students and scholars are currently working in the postmodern moment in which no one question, theory or work can solely shape the manner in which historians study the past. Thus, although Kocka, Antohi and Schissler expressed some dissatisfaction with the consequences of postmodernity, the papers highlighted that the multiplicity of topics, approaches and reinterpretations benefit the field of historical studies by opening up new avenues for thinking about and analyzing the past. The presenters therefore illustrated not only the usefulness of drawing on theories and concepts from a variety of academic disciplines to approach their own specific projects, but also the fruitful ways in which their empirical research can aid scholars in rethinking and modifying these very theories and concepts.

Tagungsbericht *The Impact of Social and Cultural Theories on Historical Approaches to the European Public Sphere, Culture and Politics*. 28.11.2005-29.11.2005, Berlin, in: H-Soz-u-Kult 14.02.2006.