

VERENA BUNKUS

Gotha Research Centre of the University of Erfurt

CHRISTOPH MAISCH

European University Viadrina

**“POLITICAL EPISTEMOLOGIES OF EASTERN EUROPE”.**  
**REPORT ON INTERNATIONAL WORKSHOP**  
(ERFURT, 24–25.11.2017)

The conference on Political Epistemologies of Eastern Europe<sup>1</sup>, which took place in November 2017 in Erfurt, inaugurated a broadly conceived program on the investigation of Eastern and Central Europe. Political epistemology, an approach originating from historical epistemology and investigating different epistemological lines in their political entanglements, should bring forward the so far unnoticed or marginally noticed approaches from the history of science originating in the region. With further events already planned (conference “Soviet States and Beyond: Political Epistemologies of/and Marxism 1917–1945–1968” in Moscow in June 2018 and conference “A New Culture of Truth? On the Transformation of Political Epistemologies since the 1960s” in Erfurt in October 2018), the program of investigation of political epistemologies should move beyond Eastern and Central Europe and aim also at a com-

---

<sup>1</sup> Political Epistemologies of Eastern Europe, Kleine Synagoge Erfurt / Max-Weber-Kolleg, University of Erfurt, 24.11.2017–25.11.2017. Organized by Friedrich Cain (University of Erfurt, Max Weber Center for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies), Dietlind Hüchtker (Leibniz Institute for the History and Culture of Eastern Europe, GWZO, Leipzig), Bernhard Kleeberg (University of Erfurt, Max Weber Center for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies), and Jan Surman (IGITI Higher School of Economics, Moscow / IFK Vienna, Kunstuniversität Linz). For the description and program see <https://www.uni-erfurt.de/max-weber-kolleg/personen/bernhard-kleeberg/forschung/forschungsprojekte/east-european-epistemologies/international-workshop-of-political-epistemologies/> [last accessed 30.05.2018].

parative, transnational and global perspective, helping to understand not only the past but also the present.

The international workshop was opened by Friedrich Cain and Bernhard Kleeberg (both Erfurt) at the Max Weber Kolleg. The focus was pointing to the diverse conceptions of “Eastern” European Epistemologies, the conceptions of rationality and truth and their historical, political or otherwise bound ideological claims. This perspective had the advantage of giving room for a broader history of *(East) European Epistemologies* that in respect to the cultural shaping of rationalities and epistemological categories throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century showed an incredible variety. In the words of Kleeberg and Cain “there is a significant difference between an analysis of the variations of European ideologies, and the approach that might be called a *Political*, or *Political-Historical Epistemology*: The latter *does not* propose: (1) a clear-cut border between *rationality* and *ideology* in the sense that there would be a sphere of misinformation, manipulation and oppression as opposed to a sphere of rationality, truth, and freedom; and it *does not* propose (2) a clear-cut border between *science* and *politics*, even though it is of course of *analytical* importance to differentiate between social fields with their respective habits and hierarchies or communicative systems that follow the code of power/powerlessness or the code of true and false.” Epistemology in this sense can be seen as a study of “*the whole system of the scientific production of knowledge*” in which it is about scientific cultures and everything they include. Here, an internal political claim is already inherent in relation to power structures, hierarchies and dominant concepts and truth regimes. Second, epistemology can be understood in the Kantian tradition of “*Erkenntnistheorie*” in which they “refer to a *theory of knowledge*” that ask about the *limits* and *criteria* of knowledge. Historical Epistemology then attempts to historicize epistemological categories and parameters like evidence, facts, objectivity, and observation.

Thus, the overall question of the workshop was placed between political, ideological and territorial changes in the loosely conceptualized area of Eastern Europe. The unique historical circumstances that shaped its perspectives from and on the perception and functioning of epistemologies, and the related intellectual actor networks played a major role in those.

The conference started with a panel on early approaches from law and biology. In her paper, Marta Bucholc (Bonn/Warsaw) diagnosed law as underrepresented in the discussion of history of science in Europe today. Consequently, lawyers rarely apply to theories of mainstream sociology and philosophy of science. In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, however, German and Austrian-Hungarian academia intensively discussed law as science. Few outsiders, particularly the so-called *Freirechtsschule* and Eugen Ehrlich, developed their ideas against the scientific establishment. Law as a science,

according to them, should apply the methods and modes of reasoning of empirical science of society, thus, accordingly transform law into an empirical study of social norms. Ehrlich, as an empirical sociologist of law, focused on the living law of the peoples of the Austro-Hungarian Empire as an alternative to the “law in books”. Undermining the unity and uniformity of state legal order at the time of great codification and unification of law, Ehrlich discovered legal pluralism underneath alleged legal uniformity. Yet, Ehrlich’s ideas did not gain acceptance, rather the opposite path was chosen: law became more and more state-oriented and academically isolated. Tomáš Hermann and Jan Musil (Prague) introduced the historian of science and biologist Emanuel Rádl. Rádl could be seen as the Czech version of Ludwik Fleck. Before the First World War he worked on experimental science and phototropism but also published on the history of biology and biological theories, opposing objectivism and positivism. During the interwar period and the Second World War he focused on theories of democracy, critique of racism, tribal nationalism and reflections about “Western and Eastern” civilization and moralism. He criticized Darwin and advertised the full scope of diverse theories in the history of the investigation of life and biological matters. Rádl situated his concept of Truth as a personal matter of conviction which had its beginnings in the experience of reality. Thus, theory became one of the main sources to change personal convictions and with it the perception of reality. The dualism of subject and object is rather complex, since conviction and theory influence each other and become unstable elements. Out of this instability of subject-matter grows a special responsibility for the philosopher and scientist, since a scientific and philosophical investigation, in the meaning of cultural influence and public life, shapes theory and political ideologies and vice versa. Bernhard Kleeberg commented in the context of political epistemologies, which thus far only existed in Rádl’s combination of conviction and theory and thus interpret science in a Fleckian way as a product of culture.

The second panel explored western-eastern Europe’s connections. Gábor Gángó (Erfurt) focused on Siegfried Kracauer’s views on Nazi films and Nazi propaganda and his aesthetics of manipulation. He pointed out the complexity of the research due to Kracauer’s US employment during the war and his often-changing intentions and his methodological extravagance. Gángó relinked Kracauer’s development of his epistemology to his phenomenological research and to the works of Georg Simmel and Karl Mannheim. Thus, he set in relation to Kracauer’s 1938 study on subject matter and totalitarian propaganda and its aesthetical aspects. From there he pointed out the concept of manipulation in relation with Kracauer’s efforts to formalize the epistemological status of propaganda propositions. Gángó emphasized that Kracauer’s major scientific goal was the creation of an aesthetic of manipulation hidden behind his offi-

cial research during the war. Katrin Steffen (Lüneburg) presented the fields of medicine, anthropology and eugenics, and their political and ideological agenda in the newly born Polish state from 1918. She analyzed the example of Ludwik Hirszfeld and others, who worked in the state owned hygienic institute on blood types. She focused on the intellectual and administrative heritage of the three former imperial powers (German, Austrian-Hungarian, and Russian Empires) on the Polish territories. The newly formed intellectual and scientific elite brought knowledge and science traditions from all former empires, while the new administration encouraged them to outshine the former imperial states to prove the value and legitimacy of the Republic. At the same moment, the imperial agenda and contacts to the former institutions of education of the scientist, especially in Germany, shaped the scientific agenda. Scientification and scientific knowledge became fundamental to create the Polish state under the technocratic Sanacja regime (1926–1939). Travelling concepts and the circulation of knowledge played a major role for the practical solution of Problems in Poland. Research in the field of eugenics in the newly formed hygiene institutes and the fight against STDs and demographic issues, cohabitated the aim of the state and the scientist. Thus, at the same time state-controlled sovereignty meant the implementation of eugenic engineering and the biologicalisation of the social in Poland. Emilia Plosceanu (Paris) introduced the Romanian Social Institute (RSI) and its life time president sociologist Dimitrie Gusti (1880–1955) as a case study for politically driven epistemological research. While the RSI was a collaborative research network dedicated to investigation of local social problems, it sustained many international cooperations. It was organized in interdisciplinary study groups who published its main periodical, *Arhiva pentru știința și reforma socială* (*Archives for Science and Social Reform*), between 1919–1943 and a monthly review, *Sociologie românească* (*Romanian Sociology*) between 1936–1942. The RSI's opus magnum *Enciclopedia României* (*Encyclopedia of Romania*), published between 1938–1943, illustrated sociology as the “science of the nation”. Gusti, a pre First World War Germany trained sociologist, aimed to create a methodological and theoretical orientation with a local “epistemic community” that wished to establish sociology as a major science and as a way of “soft power”, meaning here the peaceful management of conflicts via knowledge and research by denationalizing science via its local social positioning. Gusti defined his system of sociology as “sociological parallelism” which was an open concept, free-floating within the humanities and social sciences, and by nowadays standards could be called interdisciplinary. From here, Gusti developed a political epistemology as a combination of the encyclopedic knowledge policy of the RSI, its local empirical field of study and the reform programs as well as power discourses of national unity. In the following discussion, Steffen got more into detail about the biological engineering

in interwar Poland. The main aim of the Sanacja Regime was to get the great unproductive agrarian areas of Poland organized in terms of workers-economic and family planning, which deeply politicized the subject matter of science and its epistemology. Though for Hirschfeld the knowledge claim of biology was equal to truth claim. He thought of his blood-group-study as objective, which leads to the question of the local ties and contexts of objectivity and where researchers and scientist draw the disciplinary lines between objectivity and subjectivity. Furthermore, the question was linked to the construction of western and eastern post imperial cultures and how to refer to them, since national and post-imperial categories overlap at the same time and followed diverse science traditions.

In the third panel, again situated in the interwar period, communist approaches in science thinking have been discussed. Alexander N. Dmitriev (Moscow) highlighted major studies on new history and philosophy of science, published in the early Soviet Union, and their European context. The 1910's were marked by a rise of public popularity of social sciences. Although academic disciplines started to develop separately, Russian historiographical traditions simultaneously promoted an integrative vision of *наука* (*Wissenschaft*) as a whole. In the 1920s, history of knowledge became a focus of the Commission for the History of Science, Philosophy and Technics (Комиссия по истории науки, философии и техники, est. 1921) of the Academy of Science, founded and led by Vladimir Vernadsky. Marxism in this context was discussed as the search of holistic and historicist treatment of intellectual development. Dmitriev identified two major general approaches in the interpretation of science and philosophy of technics, historicists and neo-positivists. After the purges in the 1930s, Boris Hessen's exemplary Marxist approach was criticised. Thus liberal Vernadsky, rather than Marxist Hessen, became a great-founder for main-stream late Soviet historiography of science. Vedran Duančić (Zagreb) dealt with the epistemology of natural sciences in the 1930s to 1950s. In Yugoslav sciences, ten years later than in the Soviet Union, charges of vulgar mechanist materialism were prompted by unorthodox interpretations of Freudism, the theory of relativity, and quantum mechanics. Unlike the pre-war period, as epistemology of natural sciences became a battleground within the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, natural sciences after the war received little attention from the ideological apparatus of the new Yugoslav government. In the USSR, verdicts by Stalin on several scientific matters were issued. In contrast, their "closest ally" Yugoslavia did not restrict research. Duančić explained this contrary situation as either "overlooked" by the Party or because of a shortage of authoritative cadre. Likewise to non-Marxist Yugoslavia since the 1970s, Duančić concluded that the emergence of unexpected maneuvering space in the period of heightened ideological pressure seems relevant in the light of a generational shift and in restructuring of the scientific field.

Opening the fourth panel on “transnational enrichments”, Friedrich Cain (Erfurt) proposed in his contribution the analysis of the field of education as a fruitful venue for the discussion of political epistemology. Arguing with Niklas Luhmann’s first and second order observing, and demonstrating that politics and epistemology are inseparable, he detected three examples of strongly interconnected practices in Poland between the turn of the century to 1940. In his first case study, Cain focuses on Ovide Decroly’s model of progressive education which impacted Antoni Bolesław Dobrowolski for his claim on reforming the Polish school system. In his second case, he reasoned that the secret circles in fin-de-siècle Warsaw, focusing on education, slowly shifted to an official level. Thus, they were able to publish a book series in 1909, promoting knowledge as a new force in society. In his third ‘alternative side of education’, Cain dealt with Florian Znaniecki’s return to Poland from the US and his pledge for a humanistic science rather than a social psychology. Katherine Lebow’s (Oxford) paper focused also on interwar Polish sociologists in the United States, which she portrayed in terms of the history of emotions as a ‘transatlantic romance’. Due to American funding, a number of Polish sociologists researched in US institutions and shared a vivid interest in ‘personal documents’. Rather than describing this relationship as a diffusion of center to periphery, she pointed out the higher intellectual standing of Polish scientists in qualitative methodology. Besides, seen from the margins, the US sociologist debates reveal their intensity and politicization in methodological struggles. In the advent of changing geopolitical realities in the 1940s, Lebow concluded, this relationship cannot be described in terms of failure and discontinuity, but rather as a reminder of the roots of intellectual formations in the 1930s as well as personal bonds becoming political.

Joanna Wawrzyniak (Warsaw) opened the fifth and last panel with her contribution of Polish sociology in a comparative approach. She placed her case study into two research areas: the reconceptualization of the history of sociology, and the entanglements with developing countries during the Cold War. In the midst of the institutional revival of sociology in the 1960s with its international opening, Warsaw-based scholar Nina Assorodobraj-Kula’s work connects Eastern Central Europe with Western Africa. During her frequent stays in France, Assorodobraj-Kula was able to establish contacts with Western African intellectuals and develop an agenda to compare class formation and concepts of national-building in nineteenth-century Eastern Europe with twentieth-century Western Africa. Thus, Wawrzyniak concluded, the introduced study sheds light on the sources of production and the circulation of knowledge at the beginning and end of an intellectual generation. Both cosmopolitan and national, the roots of the modernization-backwardness-debate can be traced back into the interwar period. Finally, Karl Hall (Budapest) investigated the area of tension between

the Soviet and Western scientific cooperation. The Soviet Union contributed to the initially Western ‘atoms for peace’ movement with reliable Soviet scientists; moreover, the Soviet Academy of Science reached out to scientific institutions in East Central Europe. With the example of the Joint Institute for Nuclear Research in Dubna (Moscow Oblast), standing out for their highest scientific cooperation, Hall asked of the collaborative experiences and new strategies in the wake of discourses between creativity and forms of management. Hence, he pleaded for the worthwhile analyses of interaction of the Dubna Research Center in terms of language, material and politics, and despite the actual scientific outcome of the Dubna institution.

The workshop closed with a roundtable discussion on historicizing science in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> For a transcript of the discussion see: *Historicizing Science in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe* in this volume.