

On Sociological Classics in St. Petersburg

A non-state European University, encompassing faculties of history, political science and sociology, economics and ethnology, founded by local government and scientific institutions and supported by some distinguished international foundations has since November 1994 been at the traditional centre of the Russian scholarship – St. Petersburg. In May 1997 the Faculty of Political Science and Sociology organised (in co-operation with the Open Society Institute in Moscow – East-East Program) a scientific conference devoted to the theme "The Use and Abuse of Sociological Classics in Contemporary Sociology". Fifteen comprehensive contributions from sociologists, political scientists and historians from St. Petersburg and Moscow, Ukraine, Hungary, Poland and Czech Republic – predominantly representatives of the young and middle generation – were presented and discussed before an audience made up of specialists and numerous students of the organising faculty. A broad horizon, erudition, a remarkable selection of themes, originality of thought, open and well-informed discussions were all notable attributes of this academic symposium.

The dean of the convening faculty, V. Volkov, opened with the hypothesis of two possible approaches to the classics: a) the historical or post-modernist scepticism related to the Kuhnian image of relatively frequent changes of paradigms; b) the evaluation of the role of classics as those who by their work constituted the scientific discipline, formulated its common language and still serve as an educational example in solving sociological problems.

D. Aleksandrov wasted no time in criticising Kuhn's approach, which, it was said, was applied successfully in a few sciences only (such as geology, biology, sociology and psychology) and became popular mainly as an impulse of thought for the sociology of knowledge. However, this was not confirmed by the further developments of science and became mainly an instrument in the hands of those who felt themselves to be endangered by the progress of science. R. Shpakova from the state

Petersburg University delivered the more traditional, but thoroughly balanced view of a historian of sociology on the role of classics in the cognitive processes in this science.

The following essential contributions were presented by two sociologists from Moscow. Both issued from a positive evaluation of the role of classics rather sharing the image of continuity in sociological knowledge. By the selection of personalities, the work of whom they analysed, as well by the characteristics they ascribed to them, the speakers indirectly or explicitly criticised other figures who were often seen as crucial in the past (e.g. Comte, Marx and Parsons). A Filippov in his contribution "Georg Simmel: A Dubious Classic" depicted his hero in a very sympathetic light as one of the founding fathers of sociology who turned his attention not only to the social, cultural and time dimension of human existence, but also to the sensory and space dimension as well. It was this non-traditional extension of the subject of sociology together with the stress laid on philosophical aspects of the social, and the lack of logical dogmatism (allegedly with substantial subjective assistance of T. Parsons) that prevented him from becoming in the relevant literature the third among those scholars who distinguished sociology as a science from other sciences by explaining social phenomena exclusively by other phenomena of social character in clearly defined empirical limits. According to Filippov, the other two classics in this sense were Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, the latter also for his clear definition of the rules of sociological methods. In the course of the discussion this sociologist, in spite of his clear preferences concerning the significance of the thought of these three men, recommended that in the process of empirical study one should apply from the classical legacy as well from other theories everything that actually helps in the analysis of contemporary societies. The other orator from Moscow, V. Radaev, devoted his contribution, which was one of the highlights of the conference, to the explanation of the circumstances, both principal and typical of the time period, which made Max Weber one of the indisputable classics. According to this speaker, the status of a classic belongs nowadays to such a personality, who a) was critical

enough in relation to Marxism, but did not distance himself too far from the subject of interest of this influential school; b) deals with a sufficiently broad field of issues, his system being open and even encompassing many internal contradictions and ambivalences – it is this that makes it inspiring for the solving of new situations; c) did not close his work and thus enabled new endeavour for further developments of the conceptual framework (an example of this is Weber's contribution to stratification theory); d) uses a relatively esoteric, not always quite clear language, thus enabling various explications and applications and e) enters extra-academic issues and gives in this way the opportunity to a certain – albeit not too excessive – ideologisation of sociology in the form of simple conclusions. Some problems in this connection arise from Weber's 'Wertfreiheit' as well as his insufficient inclination to unambiguous prescriptions for sociological work. His legacy is not a suitable basis for nationalism: this ideology is so far rather awaiting a 'new Marx'. In the same spirit, using the same principles, O. Kharkhordine from the organising institution – somewhat surprisingly for some of the participants – logically and convincingly highlighted the foundationary significance of the work of the English political scientist T. Hobbes for social science, and demonstrated the possibility of applying his conceptual scheme to present-day political practices in Russia. Analogously, the Ukrainian scholar A. Pogorelyi compared the Weberian concept of rationality with the approach of the increasingly recognised civilisation theorist N. Elias.

After this fundamental block of lectures, there came the turn of several relativising contributions giving place to the representatives of alternative sociologies and, in this way, to the possibility of the emergence of diverse paradigms. T. Desseffy from Budapest analysed the undoubtedly important role of A. Schütz in creating an alternative to the Parsonian concept of culture and rationality, placing the stress on everyday human experience. E. Zdravomyslova and A. Temkina from St. Petersburg presented an extraordinarily rich characterisation of the contents and, especially, of the epistemology of feminist sociology, treating it as one of the

streams of alternative sociology, explicitly criticising the classics, mainly Durkheim's system. The erudite historian N. Koposov, also a Petersburger, informed the audience about the meeting of French sociologists and historians on the occasion of the anniversary of E. Durkheim. This conference appealed to the co-operation of history and all social sciences. It led to the identification of a protracted crisis in social sciences and signalled a possible turn towards a new, constructivist, paradigm. Thus an urgent subject of interest became the possibility of a two-fold, i.e. objective and structural, or subjective explication of society and, deduced from this a balancing between monism and dualism.

The Czech participant, P. Machonin, presented a contribution devoted to the influence of 'grand theories' on research and theory building concerning the post-communist transformations. He affirmed the existence of a post-modernist and liberal critique of rationalism and classical theories, and of the thesis on the 'end of history', acknowledging the relative justification of some aspects of this, namely those related to the collapse of communism. (Later, in response to a comment from Koposov, he asserted that, this process was of course in connection with a profound civilisation crisis that preceded the fall of communist regimes.) However, he rejected the tendency to an excessive generalisation of this critique and the exception of the liberal theory as the only one of the criticised 'grand theories'. He argued that in the study of the post-communist transformation the principle of historism must be applied as well as a highly sophisticated rational analysis using impulses from both more significant ('grand') and other sociological theories, including the alternative European and oriental sociologies, and subjecting them to normal scientific verification and falsification. A. Dmitriev from St. Petersburg reminded the participants of the relativity of the application of the political categories 'right-wing' and 'left-wing' when using classical works for analyses of contemporary societies. The young Polish sociologist A. Mielczarek introduced the example of the use of Tocqueville's theory of revolutions in an empirical research into the