

Historicizing Science in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe

Journal Article**Author(s):**

Surman, Jan; Dmitriev, Alexander; Nicolosi, Riccardo; Hüchtker, Dietlind; Wulz, Monika; Hall, Karl; Kleeberg, Bernhard; Kończal, Kornelia; Lebow, Katherine; Plosceanu, Emilia; Wawrzyniak, Joanna

Publication date:

2018

Permanent link:

<https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000311678>

Rights / license:

[Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International](#)

Originally published in:

Historyka. Studia Metodologiczne 48, <https://doi.org/10.24425/hsm.2018.124627>

JAN SURMAN, ALEXANDER DMITRIEV

National Research University Higher School of Economics

RICCARDO NICOLOSI

Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München

DIETLIND HÜCHTKER

Leibniz Institute for the History and Culture of Eastern Europe (GWZO), Leipzig

MONIKA WULZ

ETH Zürich

KARL HALL

Central European University

BERNHARD KLEEGERG, KORNELIA KOŃCZAL

Universität Erfurt

KATHERINE LEBOW

University of Oxford

Hannah-Arendt-Institut für Totalitarismusforschung e.V. an der TU Dresden

EMILIA PŁOSCEANU

École des Hautes Études Paris

JOANNA WAWRZYŃIAK

Uniwersytet Warszawski

HISTORICISING SCIENCE IN CENTRAL, EASTERN AND SOUTH-EASTERN EUROPE¹

Monika Wulz: I want to make my comment from the perspective of the field of history and philosophy of science — the field I am active in. My first remark

¹ This article is a transcript of a roundtable discussion that closed an international workshop „Political Epistemologies of Eastern Europe” (Erfurt, 24–25.11.2017). For the report see Verena Bunkus and Christoph Maisch text in this volume.

concerns the conceptual potential of the conference: I was really impressed by the wide range of topics presented and by the different disciplinary competences. It seems to be a crucial factor that a wide range of different competences is needed in order to examine and discuss the political epistemologies of Eastern Europe, from linguistic and philological competences, to the study of the political history of the countries and situations from which specific historical formations of knowledge emerged and even more of the political changes and transitions happening during the 20th century, not to forget the specific knowledge regarding the history of the scientific disciplines involved in the “political epistemologies” under scrutiny. Moreover, knowledge about the methodological questions and debates shaped in the HPS field is needed. So it seems that one person or one discipline alone cannot tackle this task. Talking about the political epistemology of Eastern Europe seems to be a genuinely interdisciplinary project in which a number of different competences are required to interact.

I would like to draw two consequences from this observation. The first concerns the question of the political in “political epistemology”, the second concerns the borders and transgressions — geographical as well as disciplinary — connected to this topic.

First, the political in “political epistemology”: I would like to refer to the talk by Jan Musil and Tomáš Hermann on the history of biology by Emmanuel Rádl and to the question whether Rádl’s history of biology involves political aspects or not: How can we know if Rádl had a political agenda before the First World War, and what makes epistemology political or non-political? One of the recurring issues in the discussions was how to examine and determine the specific political aspects of a certain field of knowledge. In all of the talks, it turned out that researching specific “political epistemologies” requires the fields of knowledge examined, as well as their protagonists, to be connected to the historical and political contexts in which they interacted — these contexts can concern either different policies in which a certain knowledge becomes effective or, on the other hand, critical interventions with regard to a political situation. In the case of Rádl, it seems to be his attitude towards what was going on in his political and social surroundings (the rising biologicistic tendencies) that adds a political outlook to his approach to writing a history of biology. Talking about “political epistemologies”, thus, requires a very strong contextualisation of the fields of knowledge examined: What is going on in a certain historical and political space and within the scientific and epistemic developments? It requires a close look at the engagements, attitudes, and interests of certain protagonists as well as the interactions between a certain field of knowledge and the political and social networks and discourses of a given time.

Second, the question of the geographical and/or national as well as disciplinary borders that come into play when talking about “Eastern European” episte-

mologies. The topics of the talks of this conference made clear that examining epistemological questions with a specific geographical focus cannot be done only within national networks. Considering knowledge formations in “Eastern Europe” during the 20th century, necessarily, transgresses any national boundaries since not only borders and nations shifted too often during that period but also scientists and scholars where not stable but moved for their education, research, and academic exchange from one place and one country to another, from one discipline to another or introduced their academic education into different policy areas. The “political epistemologies” of “Eastern Europe” cannot be understood but “transdisciplinarily” and “transnationally” (and even outside of what could be considered as “EASTN Europe”), either as shared discourses or comparable problems that travel across borders and disciplines. Formations of knowledge are spelled out differently in different places; however, they are interacting with formations of knowledge in different disciplines and different political contexts. Examining the “political epistemologies of Eastern Europe”, it can be compelling to study both: the differences of disciplinary and political contexts as well as interactions emerging from within these differential contexts.

Taking the perspective of history of science, many connections could be drawn between the different topics of the talks presented in this conference. One example would be the psychologist Wilhelm Wundt and his disciples whose works were part of several talks. Tracing the occurrences of Wundt’s psychology in the different disciplinary and political contexts in European histories and politics of knowledge is one of many interesting examples that shows how much the fields of knowledge are interconnected and yet how much they differ from each other within different political contexts during the 20th century. These interactions and yet different developments could help us think about the relations of political history and the history of science. The field of the history of science saw a huge wave of site-specific laboratory studies since the 1980s. In recent debates, however, this focus on microstudies has been challenged and the call for developing new narratives going beyond the study of closed spaces of knowledge arose. Considering the talks of this conference, we could see that the focus on “political epistemologies” can be a way of getting out of the microstudies style, which has been framing history of science for a long time, and instead develop broader perspectives that connect the history of scientific knowledge to larger social and political contexts. On the other hand, the focus on the developments and transfers of specific kinds of knowledge can be a way of developing new perspectives on the political history of “Eastern Europe” during the 20th century: Following the formations and transformations of knowledge, it becomes evident that there is no way of holding on to the national histories within clear borders. In many talks of this conference, we learned how knowledge transgressed the disciplinary and geographical borders,

as well as the temporal regimes of nation states. In this way, the connection between political history and history of science could pave a way to opening both fields and transgressing the boundaries towards a more transnational and transdisciplinary perspective on the history of knowledge in political contexts. Scientific knowledge has been transnational for a long time — which does not mean that it was always able to establish harmonious contacts. The very characteristic of knowledge can be described as transgressing national and disciplinary borders. In this way, the study of “political epistemologies of Eastern Europe” can draw a richer — in the sense of a more interconnected and still more differentiated — picture of Europe and its regimes of knowledge during the 20th century.

Riccardo Nicolosi: I would like to formulate some notes on the results of the conference starting from its title, Political Epistemologies of Eastern Europe, and focusing on the concepts resembled in it. Firstly, let’s have a look at the concept of Eastern Europe in our context. It is obviously a pragmatic category, but like every concept it has an own semantic history. In this case, the term Eastern Europe is strongly connected with the Cold War situation where it comes from. As a geopolitical category related to a specific historical time, 1945–1989, the term Eastern Europe makes perfect sense. In the context of history of science and its interconnections with politics during the Cold War, we can indeed speak of a more or less discrete space with similar, but not identical, problems with and approaches to epistemological issues. Yet, the talks in the conference were mostly on political epistemologies in interwar countries like Poland, Romania, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, for which the term Eastern Europe does not seem to make very much sense, because it is a kind of projection from the Cold War period. What we are dealing with in the case of these countries is rather a post-imperial condition which is not limited to them, think for example of Austria. In the case of Human Sciences, to use the Foucauldian term, the difference is important, because the post-imperial condition leads to a specific epistemic space where the production of knowledge on men functions not only through the distinction between normality and abnormality, which would be typical for a science dealing with a nation-building-project, but also in continuation of an imperial situation that supports heterogeneity and hybridity. As Katrin Steffen showed in her talk on Polish genetics in the interwar period, the production of knowledge in this case is framed both by the imperial epistemic space and the national context. Speaking of the political epistemologies of the interwar period, we should consider in my view the importance of the post-imperial epistemic space.

Another term which I want to problematize is the term epistemology. In the introduction to the workshop, Bernhard Kleeberg proposed two approaches to

this term: In a broader sense the concept refers to the whole system of production of scientific knowledge; in a more narrow sense, epistemology means the theory of knowledge and its historicity. My impression is that the talks in the conference were oscillating between the two meanings revealing a methodological problem. Using the term epistemology in the first, broader meaning means exploring the role of politics and ideologies in the context of the history of science which could lead us to the (simple) question of whether a scientist was involved in politics or not. I am not sure how useful talking of political epistemologies in this broader sense would be. In the second meaning you can ask the question how a certain theory of science is pre-constructed by political attitudes or ideologies. And I think that this is where the term epistemology makes sense.

The question of epistemologies is also the question about which sciences are interesting for our context; which sciences have a 'political' dimension. The sciences we were focusing on during the conference have been the social sciences, biology and the history of science itself. Here the question is: isn't it obvious that these sciences have a political dimension? Are not their epistemologies always political? Or should not we try to differentiate between social, cultural and political epistemologies?

The last point I would like to address is the meaning of the term 'political'. When we deal with clear ideological contexts like Marxism or the Cold War, is not the concept of political epistemologies a tautology? From the talk by Alexander Dmitriev, we learned that the early Soviet period was a time of de-politicized science, which as Jan Surman pointed out, is itself a phenomenon of political epistemology. There are some epistemic contexts where it seems that it is obvious that there is a political dimension.

More important to me as a student of literature is to stress that politics is mostly about political imagination. This means the way in which narratives, rhetoric, and the imaginary shape political concepts. I found the example of Polish sociology discussed by Katherine Lebow very striking, because it shows how the work of sociologists on Polish peasants in the interwar period was influenced by the imagination of a Polish nation and its roots in a peasant world. Then we had in the talk by Joanna Wawrzyniak the discussion of geographical spaces as imagined spaces and about the question of how to connect Eastern Europe and Africa. This is a question of political imagination as well. So to conclude, I think that it could be in general very promising to think of Eastern Europe as an imagined space and not so much as a geopolitical category when we talk about political epistemologies.

Dietlind Hüchtker: After these broad and interesting comments, I want to add some points on what I learned during the conference. I want to deconstruct East (Central) Europe. What I found interesting in our workshop was thinking about

spaces. Katrin Steffen had already deconstructed space as something given and called for a space of realization, as a space defined by movement. This was repeated in several other presentations, which were about the movement of people in different directions. Friedrich and Bernhard also mentioned in their presentation the idea of travelling concepts. Summing up, I would add the concepts of moving and space to the results of our workshop.

Another question we discussed: what does political epistemology mean? I would like to reformulate from what it means into the question where do we find concepts/epistemes which in general are about society and its changes, or how do epistemes influence the practices of scientists. This is what I found inspiring in our discussion: to think about crossovers between different perspectives: between epistemes and scientists, societies and scientists, travelling concepts and epistemes etc.. I want to recall what Marta Bucholz proposed. She looked at the law, a normative frame, and asked where epistemology or science started.

We learned a lot from a wide spectrum of people, from Rádl to Dmitrie Gusti, who not only stand for special epistemic ideas or opt for a theory, but were occupied with so many things, and it was very interesting to see what they combined, why, and in which contexts. Another aspect was mentioned by Katherine Lebow: emotions, which also structure epistemology.

Another issue is the black-box, the aspects we do not know. It is not only the issue of lack of sources or knowledge about it, but it is also important to reflect on the fact they were produced by our ways of constructing certain narratives on the history of science.

My last remark concerns the deconstruction of Eastern Europe. It is not true that we are discussing only Eastern Europe here, we are discussing the world with special places, with special sites, with some bi-national relationships, and transatlantic geographies. So I am not convinced about the term Eastern Europe, but I am open to learn about it.

Jan Surman: I certainly will not defend the term of Eastern Europe. During our preparations for the workshop, we discussed several spatial concepts, and it was clear that every one of them will bring a certain imagination with it. For sure, the networks we wanted to discuss are never confined within political boundaries. We could of course also focus on certain networks and look at how the definitions of political is constructed, and how epistemic concepts are constructed and interrelate these constructs to each other. And this would also bring the multiplicity of spaces, their intersections and eclipsing.

Katherine Lebow: I think we can all agree that Eastern Europe is an imagined and a constructed entity. At the same time, there is a question of power: Eastern Europe has been relatively marginalised in the canonical history of science and

intellectual history narratives. Since we are talking about agendas and politics, we also need to think about this dimension of ‘reality’. In this sense, we can also agree that Eastern Europe is both imagined and real.

Bernhard Kleeberg: The last idea you mentioned was exactly the guiding idea for our workshop. Thinking about something which we could truly term Eastern European epistemologies was always on the agenda, but none of us was sure if something like this really existed. But I would like to come back to the consequence of that. Even if we do not talk about Eastern European Epistemologies: are there specifics of the situation in the regions we discussed during the last two days that in a way shaped epistemological discussions or categories? Friedrich Cain in his introduction presented 8 points, multilingualism, circulation of elites etc., the role of ruptures, cosmopolitanism, ideological plurality, post-imperial situation etc., so there is a large set of regional specificities that seem to have had some effect on respective epistemologies. We wanted to show some of these effects during the conference.

One them is the effect of cosmopolitanism, multilingualism, and multiethnicity on epistemology, which might have fostered something like a specific awareness of plurality, of centre/periphery relations, and of the possibility of interfering with it without changing rationalities. Maybe a new perspective on the relation between particularity and universality emerged that led to a new understanding of the plurality of worlds. The second effect has something to do with the circulation of the elites and cosmopolitanism: Is there something like a cosmopolitan scholarly experience? This question has been raised in the last panel and it is very interesting with respect to the irritation of habits and routines, i.e. the possibilities of innovation triggered by the experience of different structures and different scientific communities that helps to reflect local and national scientific practices. For instance the question raised by Joanna Wawrzyniak: how does the position of the subject — Nina Assorodobraj-Kula in this case — shape the way her sociology resonates with French sociology; how does it change her epistemology? It is interesting that she worked with people from the *Annales* school, concentrated on the history of mentalities, who argued that mentalities were consequences of social structures: If you jump across different social structures, you gain an experience that effects your mentality and thus your epistemological attitude. Yet another point is the ideological plurality these people were confronted with, which might have led them to favour such methods and practices that implicated no involvement of emotions or ideologies: You say that you are simply doing science, without any ideological agenda or emotional involvement. You thus purify science and hint to specific techniques detached from the subject. Mechanical objectivity would be an example of respective epistemological ideals from the 19th century, but similar techniques can be found for our con-

texts. Exactly this situation of scientists trying to define their way in a plurality of ideologies might have intensified what Bruno Latour termed the purification of science and the separation of nature and culture.

And there is also something which seems to have nothing to do with the specific situation of CEE. Of course, you have a post-imperial situation, a thrust towards the nation state, the creation of a “new man” as a big project — all this is part of the age of technocracy, scientific management, applied psychology, and you can find it all over the world. But it is interesting that all these techniques and practices — psychological, social or technocratic — display some kind of ideological neutrality. People that refer to these techniques are not interested in what we think, but how we think. These techniques are somehow neutral, and everybody uses them, the fascists, the Nazis, the Soviets — they are used all over the world. These techniques highlight the epistemologically crucial idea of Weber’s *Zweckrationalität*, respectively of Dewey’s “problem solving”. It is interesting to see if and to what extent the political pressure does affect epistemology in a way that it is being pragmatized: People see that there is some kind of plasticity of reason and that you have to engage in moulding that reason.

Karl Hall: This is perhaps more a comment on nineteenth-century dilemmas in the space we are dealing with here — call it Habsburg, if you like — rather than on the interwar period, although I suspect that there is some continuity here. Interdisciplinarity, or multidisciplinary, whatever the anachronistic term we are using here, has a strong genealogy to the space of possibilities. If you think about the ways disciplines as such come to Polish, Czech or Hungarian-speaking institutions of higher education or academies of science, and you look at the dynamic of philologists interacting with chemists, physicists interacting with chemists, historians interacting with naturalists, it is especially evident in the Hungarian case, you get a privileging of people who are speaking the broadest language and claiming the broadest expertise. They dominate the institutions and they are suspicious of specialisation as such. I wonder whether there are any continuity issues with how we are thinking about political epistemology in the interwar period.

Alexander Dmitriev: Two short remarks from my side. First to the problem of reflexivity, today we had two panels concerned with it, and for me as a regional specialist it is also important because this problem and the discussion evidenced to new conceptual apparatus to reflexivity about reflexivity, as discussed by Ashmore² and this epistemological vocabulary. I think his vocabulary might be interesting to question our ideas on reflexivity. And this question of reflexivity is very important now when we think about the multi- and interdisciplinarity,

² M Ashmore, *The Reflexive Thesis: Writing Sociology of Scientific Knowledge*, Chicago 1989.

be it in human sciences, social sciences, natural sciences, and the question how knowledge exists and can be validated. The second point is that knowledge is a non-natural element on one hand, but there is also knowledge as a resource in its political or social usage on the other hand. For me the ideas that knowledge existing in this many levels is important for our discussions.

Monika Wulz: I would like to add one more remark regarding the relation and differences between the concepts of political, social or cultural epistemologies. Focusing on the concept of “political epistemology” at this conference, raises the question of what the tools are for analysing something as a political and not only as a social or as a cultural phenomenon. Conceptualising the political demands a way of addressing power relations and hegemonies; speaking of “political epistemologies”, thus, demands concepts for analysing power relations and hegemonies within fields of knowledge and within epistemological questions. It demands that we think more consciously about the question of which concepts could be appropriate for examining the hegemonic relations in specific kinds of case studies (colonial, postcolonial, dominant, traditional, subversive, subaltern etc.). In this way, a difference between speaking of “cultures of knowledge” and of “political epistemologies” could be made.

Kornelia Kończal (Erfurt): Instead of commenting on issues that we have discussed during the last two days, I wanted to make some remarks about this group’s future prospects. I was wondering what we could do in order to better promote the (Eastern) European epistemologies. Let me focus on three points. Firstly and obviously, research is important. Yet, most of the texts we have discussed during the last two days are not accessible to the broader academic community because they were published in rather exotic languages. This would suggest that translation is almost equally as important as research. The question thus arises whether there is any chance of having some classics of these exotic languages to be published in English. Secondly, and related to the previous point, I am afraid that to focus on Eastern Europe only runs the risk of exoticising this region. Thus, the question is whether we could develop a comparative and trans-regional agenda. Thirdly, I believe that it could be fruitful to have a look at the political epistemologies of Eastern Europe today. When observing the current developments in Poland and Hungary for instance, one cannot stop feeling that the political involvement of scholars is a highly controversial issue (again). Thus, when focusing on the most recent past we could possibly receive more interest for our overall agenda.

Joanna Wawrzyniak: If we think about our project as an ongoing project, then one of the issues that would be useful would be to go systematically into the

question of how Eastern Europe was conceptualised. It is an invented category and we all agree, but it was useful in many milieus for different things. For economic historians for instance, and they have good arguments why one should use Eastern Europe as a different category as it exhibited differences in the development of modernity and that Eastern Europe played a role in mediating between the West and Global South, if we want to add another invented category. There are scientists of the Cold War and for them Eastern Europe is a political category in a very real sense. This category is becoming objectified and it would be important to look more systematically into the different epistemic cultures which needed this category for their agenda.

Jan Surman: I just wanted to throw in two thoughts: the first about the future of our project, and another about comparisons. I think the question is whether we want to focus primarily or more on comparisons or on connections, or do we have to do both in order to see differences, similarities and transgressions. But is not necessarily easy to have both comparisons and connections in one clear cut research program. But I think our future will have to deal with both differences and similarities and networks which are enclosing multiple spaces. I think one of the problems will be then how to deal with different temporalities. 1918–1945 might be good for some reasons and bad for others, depending on the question we ask. Another issue I want to raise concerns the discussion about Eastern-Central-Southern Europe. In all the countries I know from this region there is at least one serious discussion about peripherality after 1918. I think these debates are important and they do influence sciences and scholarship, and these discussion encompass both scientific and literary fields. It is intensive and interesting and I am not aware of such discussions in other countries. And in the countries we have been dealing with these debates were a part of the discussion about cultural emancipation — not necessarily of nationalisation in the sense of rejection of inter- and transnationalism, but somehow of purification and closure of certain networks. One of the issue I think about is which lessons can we learn from the discussions of peripherality and of Eastern Europe, if we want to bring it back to the mainstream, to analyse global concepts. I'm also thinking here about the issue of malleability and changeability of functions Karl Hall and Vedran Duančić remarked before. Who discusses sciences? We have an intensive discussion in which people from various fields are debating what science is and what norms of science are; something Yehuda Elkana has worked on.³ So we have the literary and artistic intelligentsia working on a par with scholarly and scientific intel-

³ Y. Elkana, *A Programmatic Attempt at an Anthropology of Knowledge, w: Sciences and Cultures. Anthropological and Historical Studies of the Sciences*, red. Y. Elkana, E. Mendelsohn, Dordrecht 1981, s. 1–68.

ligentsia, because specialisation was not as deep as in other regions, or because simply it is a part of their knowledge agenda, which was against compartmentalisation. So this high number of transgressions — in our sense, because for our actors there were often not transgressions at all, is something important. Also because the history of science has so far only rarely been looking at sciences and their epistemologies as the results of coproduction and “transgressions”.

Bernhard Kleeberg: Let me pick up on the reflection about peripherality, but also refer to something that was raised before, i.e. failed epistemologies. This would be interesting in the more general context of global post-imperial epistemologies, comparing them to other regions and concentrating on the post-imperial aspect. The possibility to link this to more recent developments has already been discussed and we are currently thinking about building up a group which should discuss these issues in a “post-truth” era. This is especially interesting because the gatekeepers of truth seem to have changed recently or are still changing. It is not the scientist who is the gatekeeper of truth, but the spin-doctor. So what happens when the epistemologies and truth-regimes change? The idea could be to take recent discussions about post-truth and post-facticity as a starting point for discussing the different trajectories of the epistemologies that led to this point. Does post-truth in Russia today differ from post-truth in the US, has one been installed top-down while the other grew bottom-up?

Jan Surman: I just wanted to add that maybe instead of talking about peripheral epistemologies we could talk about epistemologies of peripheralness.

Emilia Plosceanu: I want to follow up about the “peripheries” and other geographical categories we are using here. “Eastern Europe” is obviously a problem for everyone. But also the fact that peripheral spaces imply that there is a centre somewhere. These different peripheries might be considered as “de-centre-d spaces”. Maybe the idea would be of “situating” the knowledge while “decentring” it. Another suggestion concerns the political aspects of epistemologies. Temporality might be one of the aspects to think about. The last two contributions in the conference were dealing with this aspect — you cannot talk about the post-war without talking about the situation before and during the war. The idea of political aspects of epistemologies maybe becomes clearer when taking knowledge in a temporal perspective. In what contexts is knowledge valid and when does it stop being so? So, the idea would be to look at the lives and deaths of political epistemologies.

Jan Surman: Immediately when I heard Emilia’s remark I thought of Joseph Roth and his comment that “Das Wesen des Zentrums ist die Peripherie.” And

I would support the idea of following lives and deaths of certain epistemologies. And we certainly we will have more conferences following the trajectories mentioned during the discussion. And I think both our workshop and this discussion have clearly demonstrated that there is a need for more work in this area, and I really look forward to both being part of this work but also seeing our impulses proliferate beyond the initial core group gathered here. With this I wanted to thank our Monika, Dietlind und Riccardo for their impulse talks, as well as all the discussants and wish us more such debates in the future.