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Sociology in Austria: Introduction

Abstract: The development of sociology in Austria has been influenced by political changes more than once during the 20th Century. After the breakup of the Habsburg Empire, a tiny successor state had to struggle to survive, and government did not spend much attention to academic affairs. Two consecutive dictatorships destroyed academic freedom and brought with them forced migration and imprisonment. Favoritism and conformism became characteristic patterns in the higher education system. After 1945 the reestablished Second Republic did not try to dismiss professors promoted during the dictatorship and did not invite exiled academics back home. The consequence was the continuation of behavioral patterns in academia established earlier: Austria’s postwar academic world was not governed by meritocratic criteria but the effect of a ‘dynamic adaptation’ to new political regimes. Following an institutionalist point of view one had to take into account such discontinuities and pay tribute to episodes of de-institutionalization.

Keywords: Austria; conformism; de-nazification; governance; institutionalization; Nazism; universities

On a Sunday evening in January 1945, a twenty-nine year old American writes a letter to his parents back home in Texas about a dinner with his two new bosses the day before. They invited him to a fancy restaurant and over some drinks and an expensive meal (the writer reports the exact amount of dollars spent: $20, which is today about $260) the two seniors laid out the job offered to him. When it came to bargain the salary, the young man asked, in his eyes, for much more than he thought reasonable, but the two added 500 dollars above his grandiose $4,500. The letter continues congratulating the parents whose ‘good blood and bones and brash you all put into me began to come through a little’ (Mills 2000, p. 84).

The three men spending an evening together were C. Wright Mills; Robert K. Merton, then thirty-four years old; and as the senior at the table Paul F. Lazarsfeld, who turned 44 that year. Subsequently Mills was hired by the directors of the Bureau of Applied Social Research to work as the field director in Decatur, Illinois. There the Bureau had planned to collect data for their next big study on the role of media in forming public opinions. Several years later, after struggling with Mills about his unwillingness or inability to finish the manuscript, Lazarsfeld dismissed him and hired a substitute, Elihu Katz, who managed to finalize what became published as Personal Influence (Katz & Lazarsfeld 1955). Later, Mills took revenge by criticizing the style of work he should have done as ‘abstracted empiricism’ (Mills 1959).

Around the time when the three Americans talked business in Manhattan, a not-so-young man took part in what has been called an ‘evacuation action’. The location was at World War II’s eastern front where the Soviet Union’s Red Army executed heavy pressure on the Nazi Wehrmacht. Fifty-one year old Benedikt Kautsky was one of the thousands of prisoners of the concentration camp Auschwitz who had to walk to the Gleiwitz camp (now Gliwice, Poland) about 50 kilometers deep in the Third Reich’s shrinking domain. Kautsky, the son of the prominent theoretician of the Second Socialist International Karl Kautsky, survived the evacuation march and four camps altogether where he had been imprisoned for seven years. After his liberation by Allied troops in Buchenwald, he moved to Switzerland to recover. While there for six months he wrote a book about the camps, Teufel und Verdammte (Devils and Damned), which came out in Zurich in 1946. It is more than an eyewitness account but also a sound sociological analysis. Kautsky presented his view of the camp’s social organization at least once in front