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The Role of the Social Sciences and Humanities in Contemporary Society (The Slovak Case)

In the first part of the paper the author briefly describes the role of social sciences and humanities in the present in Europe and in Slovakia. The description focuses on those research fields, in which social sciences and humanities contribute to the scientific knowledge the most.

Key words: the role of social sciences and humanities, contemporary society, Europe, Slovakia

In the second part the author addresses the questions, which were prepared by the organizers of the round table and sent to all participants in advance. Namely: How is the relationship between the state and scientific institutions? What sources of funding are available for scientific study? Which institutions and in what ways conduct studies in the humanities? How are the research topics for projects chosen? The answers to these questions are based on participant's experiences as a member of diverse Slovak and international research committees and institutions.

Introduction: The Role of the Social Sciences and Humanities Currently

The role of the social sciences and humanities in contemporary society (in which I include the academic community) is, needless to say, an extremely broad theme. Some introductory thoughts emerged from the call for papers, which was circulated by the round table organizing team (Pavičević 2012). The authors of this appeal focused on the social changes which have taken place in recent decades and on the characteristics of the *postmodern condition* in society and in scholarly thinking.

For me, the term *postmodern condition* is linked above all with the work of Jean Francois Lyotard (1979) and also David Harvey (2000). We might certainly mention other authors also in the context of discussion. In the following reflections, however, by the postmodern condition I will understand above all the conception which Lyotard developed.¹ Lyotard defines the postmodern condition in science as “incredulity

¹ I draw on Lyotard principally for this reason, that his work is focused especially on science and the notion of knowledge.

towards metanarratives” (1984 English ed. p. xxiv). He says that “the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age” (p. 3).² He links the notion of knowledge with the question of power³ and with the process of legitimisation and delegitimisation of the notion of knowledge. The question is posed: to what extent can science attain to objective truth? (This does not mean, however, that Lyotard denied the capacity of science to reach objective truth). And finally, his work highlights the transition towards interdisciplinary research.

In my opinion, most of Lyotard’s ideas can still be regarded as valid. His book drew attention to the paradigm change in scholarly research, that is to say, the distrust of metanarratives, and turned the attention of researchers to the diversity and incommensurability of phenomena.⁴ Also, the book dealt extensively with the relation between science, scientific research and power. For our discussion in this roundtable, that is particularly important. Because the organisers have presented us with questions which concern the relationship between the state and scientific institutions. They are asking us about the mode of selection of research topics and research projects, the organisational structures, the sources of finance, and so on. I think we will agree that most of these questions are directly concerned with competence and power.

However, before passing on to the specific questions of our roundtable’s organisers, I would like to say something very briefly about postdisciplinary research. The authors of the call for papers mention *postdisciplinarity* as a further characteristic of the postmodern condition. Norman Fairclough defines the term as follows: “...post-disciplinary’ approaches [...] include a principled rejection of disciplines and a problem-oriented approach to research in which concepts, categories and methods are developed without regard for conventional disciplinary boundaries” (Fairclough 2005: 2). Fairclough does not think, however, that we should entirely reject or negate the boundaries of the disciplines. He is an advocate of transdisciplinary research, which he characterises as follows: “‘transdisciplinary research’ [...] implies for me that dialogue with other disciplines and theories is a source of theoretical and methodological development. This separates transdisciplinary research from some forms of interdisciplinary research which assemble different disciplines around particular themes and projects without any commitment to change the boundaries and relations between them.” (Fairclough 2005: 2). I myself share this attitude. I would favour transdisciplinary research as Fairclough has defined it, and I consider it a useful methodological procedure, for example in multidisciplinary teams.

Having explained how I will understand the concepts used in discussion, I will now move on to the question of how I see the role of the social science and humanities in the current circumstances. I think that the social sciences and humanities focus on a number of research areas. Findings in these areas have a direct significance for contemporary societies and for the contemporary human being. I have in mind especially findings in the following research areas:

² This process of change began, according to Lyotard, from the end of the 1950s. Harvey considers the year 1973 as the beginning of the postmodern era.

³ Lyotard addresses the question, “Who decides what knowledge is?” (p. 9) .

⁴ “postmodern knowledge[...] refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable.” (Lyotard 1984: p. xxv).

- development and cultivation of concepts of humanity, culture and intellectual traditions;
- development of human rights and freedoms;
- support and development of the integrated human personality;
- support and development of a consolidated society and social cohesion.

Other irreplaceable functions of the social sciences and humanities are defined, for example, in an Academia Europaea position paper (2012), where the following functions are emphasised: “[...] the Humanities and Social Sciences foster the self-awareness, critical reasoning and methodological reflection that is vital to any democratic decision process. [...] it is the Humanities and Social Sciences that reflect on ethics [...] the Humanities and Social Sciences are essential to nourish our spiritual life, imagination and creativity, and to understand both ourselves and man’s relationship to his environment.” (Academia Europaea position paper 2012: 4)

The question arises, is it possible for the social sciences and humanities in current circumstances to persuade, firstly their colleagues from the natural sciences and technical disciplines, and secondly the rest of society, that their research is indispensable?

I think that the situation of the social sciences and humanities in Europe is moving between two poles, as analysed in the above-mentioned Academia Europaea position paper (cf. particularly pp. 2-4) . On the one hand, during recent decades there has been a visible shift in the politics of funding in science: state and public fundings are concentrating more and more on the “immediately profitable” research sectors. For this reason they give preference to scientific disciplines which are directly connected to industry and commerce. This trend in the financing of science comes about at the expense of many of the social sciences and humane disciplines. On the other hand, when communities of scholars repeatedly drew attention to this fact, certain changes appeared in funding. For example, the European Commission in its documents proclaims the role of the social sciences and humanities also in the development of knowledge and innovation. However, what do these proclamations mean in practice? To take an example, in Horizon 2020 - The Framework Programme for Research and Innovation, the social sciences and humanities are mentioned in researching the priority area of societal challenges. It is expected that through their research the scientists will determine the key problems of contemporary society and will seek strategies by which these problems may be resolved. In the final analysis, then, it is expected that the research findings will help initiate various state or public policies. These policies would be aimed at bringing the desired changes in society’s current problem areas.

I have no objection to this type of research. On the contrary, I consider it important that the thought should be constantly kept in mind, how the data acquired by fundamental research are to be utilised and applied. I do, however, object to the fact that the European Commission, through its programme funding, gives preference above all to applied projects to the detriment of fundamental research. This tendency, alas, also influences policies on science at the national level, as I will now show, taking the example of Slovakia.

Concepts and Strategies in Scientific Research in the Social Sciences and Humanities in Slovakia

Research in the social sciences and humanities in Slovakia is carried out mainly at state institutions. By that I mean universities and other third-level academies, the Slovak Academy of Science, museums, galleries, and so on. During the last two decades some private third-level colleges have emerged, and also some non-state research institutions, for example, the think tanks such as IVO (Institute for Public Affairs), M.E.S.A. 10 (Centre for Economic Analysis) and others.⁵ However, the share of non-state institutions in scientific research in the field of the social science and humanities is still lower than the share of the state institutions.

Research in the state research institutions is conducted almost exclusively with money from the state budget, which, however, institutions gain principally by competitive means, by means of projects.

As a rule, state research institutions have certain basic finances, which they receive every year from the state budget. The basic finances comprise salaries for permanent staff and a minimum of resources for the normal running of the institution. All other financial resources must be acquired by the institution by means of projects. It follows that the institution must also acquire salaries for the new staff members which it wishes to employ in the projects. If the institution does not have enough projects, then it does not have sufficient financial means for research activity, for new researchers, and for the production of research findings. This reality is afterwards reflected in a lowering of that particular institution's rating. A lowered rating for the institution worsens the chances of acquiring a project. This may give rise to a vicious circle, from which the institution will have difficulty breaking free.

Fundamental scientific research in Slovakia may receive support from two grant agencies. Both of them acquire their finances from the state budget. One is VEGA – Scientific Grant Agency of the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic and of the Slovak Academy of Sciences.⁶ Here it is possible to get approval for financially less demanding projects of fundamental research. In the social sciences and humanities, projects receive roughly €2,000 to €3,000 per person per year. The success rate in project approval is relatively high, approaching 70-75%. However, it is not possible to acquire the money for project workers' salaries from this agency. The project leader must therefore organise projects so that the team members will be staff members from his/her own institution (that is to say, from the permanent staff), or an agreement may be made with other institutions to include staff members of theirs.

The second agency is called APVV, Slovak Research and Development Agency, and this gives complex financing for projects.⁷ Its grants are normally related to salary, capital and running costs. Here a general invitation to submit applications is issued once yearly, and proposals for scientific projects may be submitted without thematic restrictions. In other words, it is a once-off invitation for national projects of fundamental research. But even in this invitation there exists a category of “applied

⁵ For more information about think tanks in Slovakia see <http://greenpages.spectator.sme.sk/en/c/think-tanks.html> opened 27 January 2013.

⁶ For more information see [http://vega.minedu.sk/e-VEGA/\(S\(jsa11h45akgeid55cg0wqh45\)\)/Default.aspx](http://vega.minedu.sk/e-VEGA/(S(jsa11h45akgeid55cg0wqh45))/Default.aspx) opened 27 January 2013

⁷ For more information see <http://www.apvv.sk/agentura?lang=en> opened 27 January 2013.

projects”, and proposals for applied projects are in competition with projects of fundamental research.

Where finance is concerned, here it is possible to get good financial support for projects. In 2011, on the basis of the general call for submissions, €3 million was divided out among all projects for their entire project periods. The maximum project period is 4 years. Altogether, in 2011 there were 864 projects from all disciplines which presented submissions and sought financing to the amount of €82.095 million. The success rate in project approval was somewhere between 25% and 26%. Of the entire financial means distributed, the social sciences and humanities received 15%. This percentage reflected not only the lower financial demands of projects but also the lower activity of scientists from the social sciences and humanities. In other words, scientists from the social sciences and humanities present fewer proposals for projects than scientists from the technical and natural sciences.

All other invitations by the agency are aimed at applied research, mobility, and completing the financing of EU projects from the EU Framework Programme scheme or structural funds. The agency’s policy reflects the scientific policy of the European commission, which likewise gives preference to applied research over fundamental research.

Other possibilities for financing fundamental research in the Slovak Republic in the social sciences and humanities do not really exist. Various thematically specialised research activities of the state administration, for example the ministries, the Social Development Fund, and so on, have the character of applied projects. Where the private sector is concerned (industry, banks, etc.), the social sciences and humanities receive scarcely any support. In exceptional cases programmes emerge for the support of art (but not art research), preservation of the cultural heritage, and so on.

So then, what are the strategies of scientific institutions in the field of social sciences and humanities in Slovakia? As an example, I will instance the strategies of the institutes of the Slovak Academy of Sciences (henceforward SAS). The institutes have an elaborate “Concept of research and development activity of the Organisation” for at least the proximate 4-year period. This document includes a selection of the research topics with which the institute will be concerned. The document also includes a provisional time harmonogram and strategy or plan of the methods by which the given SAS institute will finance its research projects. The concept and strategy of scientific research as a rule is responsive to the various documents of the Slovak government in the area of scientific policy. Likewise, the concept and strategy is premised on international documents, such as Horizon 2020. An international panel of experts evaluates the concept and strategy of each institute in a regular assessment in the SAS, conducted every four years.

So as to be able to finance their concept of research, the SAS institutes present project proposals to national and international grant schemes or seek to become involved in projects prepared by various consortia on the national and international levels. In the assessment of an institute, projects from the EU framework programmes, or from other EU sources, have the highest status. The advantage of EU projects is the acquisition of relatively high volumes of financial means. Their disadvantage is the complicated and time-consuming administration of the projects. Next to these in status and in the scale of the financial means acquired, there are projects at the national level. It is up to the director and staff members of the given scientific institute how they manage to create a balance between projects on varying levels and with varying orientations. In other

words, a balance between fundamental and applied research, between interdisciplinary /transdisciplinary projects and special projects from one discipline only, and likewise a balance between national and international projects.

In the SAS institutes no one prescribes to the director and the academic community what they must do or how they must do it. However, the results of scientific research by the given institute are evaluated, and thereafter the institute's rating has direct and indirect financial consequences.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to give my answers, in concise summary, to the questions which the organisers have posed.

I have no doubt that the social sciences and humanities are an integral part of scientific research in the present day. Without them, scientific knowledge would not be complex. It is in the following areas that I see the irreplaceable role of the social sciences and humanities in science and society: development of critical reasoning and methodological reflection, support for spiritual life, imagination and creativity; development of human rights and freedoms; development of the integrated human personality; a consolidated society, and social cohesion. I think that scientists in the social and humanities fields especially have the task of convincing not only their colleagues in other scientific disciplines but also the state and public institutions and lay public opinion, of the importance of their scientific research. I am aware that performing this task is not easy. It is an endless process of argumentation and lobbying on various levels.

As regards the organisation of research in a scientific institution, I consider it very important to focus on the following procedures: 1. To create a concept of research for some period of time, which will emerge from open discussion by the academic community at the particular institute. The final concept of research should be the result of consensus by the academic community, and at the same time it should be responsive to conceptions of scientific research at the national and international levels. Equally, such a document ought to show what weight the given institute attributes to projects of fundamental and applied research. In the case of the Slovak Republic, most of the research work carried out in the area of the social sciences and humanities is conducted in state institutions and with finance from the state or EU budgets. I believe that the current organisational and financial conditions in public sector institutions continue to offer sufficient space for free scientific enquiry. It is therefore in the power of the academic communities to construct their research concepts principally on the basis of their scientific opinion. Thereafter, the financial and organisational strategies of the institution should be subordinate to that scientific opinion and that scientific concept.

I argue that in the field of science the rule has not ceased to apply: first one must have a good idea and think it through. Afterwards, one can get finance also. Granted, when stating this I am in no way underestimating the importance of good strategies and good management by the institution. I simply wish to emphasise the banal truth that without scientific creativity and imagination, there is no chance that scientific research will be able to function successfully.

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