

### The Austrian Sociological Association and Austrian Sociology - another view

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The Austrian Sociological Association and Austrian Sociology – Another view<sup>1</sup>

*Abstract*

In the June 2002 issue of *International Sociology*, Christian Fleck published a report on the *Austrian Sociological Association* (OeGS) which was very critical of that association and the achievements of Austrian sociology in general.<sup>2</sup> In this paper, we argue that this was a rather one-sided view. We show that the OeGS and its members have been very active in fostering international contacts with sociologists from neighbouring countries (Germany, Switzerland, Hungary, Slovakia, Poland), by organising common congresses and workshops, and publishing books. In the Eighties, one of the most important achievements – omitted by Fleck - was the initiation of the *European Sociological Association* and the organisation of the first European Congress of Sociology in Vienna in 1992. Fleck not only disparages the achievement of Austrian sociology in the Sixties and Seventies, but even more so those in the Eighties and Nineties. Between 1950 and 2002, Austrian sociologists have published nearly 1200 books (Haller 2004) thus contributing significantly to the establishment of sociological research and thinking about contemporary Austrian society.

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<sup>1</sup> Many thanks for careful reading of the text go to Prof. Pamela and Joachim Savelsberg (University of Minnesota; Joachim Savelsberg is visiting professor at the Department of Sociology, University of Graz in 2003/04).

<sup>2</sup> Christian Fleck, „'No brains, No Initiative, No Collaboration' – The Austrian Case“, *International Sociology*, June 2002, vol.17(2), pp. 199-211.

Max Haller, Franz Traxler

The Austrian Sociological Association and Austrian Sociology – Another view<sup>3</sup>

In the June 2002 issue of *International Sociology*, the official Journal of the *International Sociological Association*, Christian Fleck (Graz) published a review of the history of the Austrian Sociological Association (*Oesterreichische Gesellschaft für Soziologie – OeGS*), since 1945. He concluded that the OeGS „does not function as a professional organization,“ that its influence on university curricula and recruitment policies „has been weak, the participation of its members is poor, and its international standing is negligible.“ (p.199) According to Fleck, Paul Lazarsfeld’s judgement of Austrian sociology in the late 1950’s still applies: „no brains, no initiative, no collaboration“. These highly value-laden, derogatory statements, in our view, are strongly misleading. It is rather surprising that a colleague who claims to be a specialist on the history of Austrian sociology could present such a one-sided picture – often evidently against his own knowledge. The authors of this comment have been presidents of the Association during the period in question (Haller 1985-89, Traxler 1993-97), and they would like to provide a corrective to the account presented by Fleck.

It is true, as Fleck notes, that during the 1950’s and early ‘60s, Austrian sociology as well as the OeGS were rather weak. But this was no peculiarity of Austria; nearly all over Europe, particularly in the former fascist countries of central Europe, sociology had to be established anew. It is a rather one-sided view, however, that from the late sixties on, when sociology was institutionalised as a main curriculum at the universities of Vienna and Linz and later, in the eighties, in Graz and Salzburg, university sociology remained politically conservative and scientifically weak, and that only the Institute for Advanced Studies provided a liberal and progressive place for sociological research. From the early sixties on, sociological research and teaching in Austria grew steadily and produced some notable results. At the university of Vienna, Leopold Rosenmayr, Eva Köckeis and Henrik Kreutz carried out a series of

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studies on the sociology of family, youth and on old aged people already in the Sixties. Some of their findings have become international standard in the respective fields (e.g., the insight that old people want „intimacy at a distance“). Their work also had considerable influence on social policy. Erich Bodzenta, at the universities of Vienna and Linz, carried out well known studies on the sociology of community, social structure and poverty; Friedrich Fürstenberg (Linz) wrote a series of publications on economic and industrial sociology; also the sociology of religion (Laszlo Vaskovics and the “Institute for Church Research” in Vienna) and arts (Robert Reichardt) were among the topics investigated at this time. These professors often collaborated with small groups of young researchers; it is simply false that „none of these professors were able to establish a good, stable rapport with their students,“ as Fleck maintains.

A rather one-sided sketch is also presented concerning the development of the OeGS from the early seventies on. First, it is simply wrong that the society „was open to nearly everyone“ and did „at no time ask for a minimum level of formal competence or proved recognition.“ It is clearly spelled out in the statutes that persons can become members who either have a degree in sociology (the large majority) or who are carrying out sociological work. Advanced students in sociology can become “student members,” in line with practices elsewhere, for example in the *American Sociological Association*. If there is no written application (during our presidency, new members had to fill out a form about their education, current work, publications etc.), at least a verbal proof of a sociological qualification is regularly demanded at the annual general meetings of the association, when new members are accepted. (In most cases, some colleagues are present who know the applicants personally). It is true, however, that it has never been a deliberate strategy of the Society, to „restrict itself to the higher ranking status groups“ (a model Fleck seems to prefer), but to remain open for advanced students and persons who carry out sociological research without having a degree in sociology. In this regard, it is clearly more „democratic“ than, for instance, the German Sociological Association.

A major reproach of Fleck is that the OeGS has never had a strong influence in Austria’s science policies, on university reforms and recruitment policies. While this is true, the Austrian situation does not seem to differ fundamentally from that in other

countries in this respect. Political decisions about the installation of academic curricula are made outside the universities in most European countries; professional associations can give advice and make proposals (and the OeGS has done much of both). A powerful and influential political bureaucracy is indeed a typical feature of Austrian society. Yet, many former OeGS presidents (such as Rosenmayr, Bodzenta, Fürstenberg and Freisitzer, to mention only those of the 1960's and 1970's) have actively collaborated in their departments and universities as well as in ministerial committees to establish the new curricula of sociology. It is nearly a slander to allege that these scholars have acted primarily according to their „party affiliations“, but never in the interest of their profession.

Two further reproaches warrant some comment. The first concerns the alleged provinciality of the OeGS. In this regard, Fleck does omit practically all international activities that the OeGS has initiated during the 1980ies and 1990ies and their outcomes that we think have been considerable. The only event he mentions is the large conference held jointly by the Austrian, German and Swiss sociological associations in Zürich (Switzerland) in 1988; a large volume emerged out of this conference (Haller/Hoffmann-Nowonty/Zapf, 1989). In 1998 a sequel to this event was held in Freiburg (Germany). One of the most important international activities of the OeGS, however, was its involvement in the establishment of the *European Sociological Association* (ESA). The idea to establish such an association was first brought forward during the Biannual Congress of the OeGS in Graz, held as an international conference and entitled „Society at Borderlines. Social Structure and Social Consciousness in East and West Europe.“ Following this conference, a small organising group was established, chaired by Max Haller (Graz) and David Lane (Cambridge), which organised the First European Congress of Sociology in Vienna 1992, with Rudolf Richter as chair of the organisation committee. At this conference about 600 sociologists from all over Europe met in Vienna and the proceedings were published (Haller/Richter, 1994). These activities resulted in the foundation of the *European Sociological Association*. This association is now growing and gaining visibility at the international level (holding biannual meetings, involving numerous sections, and publishing a book series as well as its own journal, *European Societies*). Several Austrian sociologists have been active within the ESA for years, as members of the board (Eva Cyba and Max Haller; the latter acted also as vice-president 2000-

01) and as organizers of meetings of Research Networks (Eva Cyba for the network “Gender relations”, Franz Traxler for the network “Industrial Relations”).

In addition, a series of other national and international meetings and conferences have been organised, either directly by the OeGS or by individual members. We can mention only a few. In 1989 Max Haller and Gerald Mozetic organized a conference of central European sociologists on “Ethnicity and nation in Europe” in Krakow, Poland. In 1994, Rudolf Richter organized the 35<sup>th</sup> Seminar of the ISA-Research Committee on Family in Strobl (Austria); the contributions were published in a volume (Richter/Supper, 1999). Richter was also active as vice-president of the Research Committee on Family of the ISA (1998-2002). In 1990, he organized – with L. Cseh Szombathy – a workshop in Vienna about families in Vienna and Budapest (papers published in Cseh-Szombathy/Richter, 1993). From the early seventies through the late eighties, regular biannual “Austrian-Polish Sociological Talks” were organized by Klaus Zapotoczky (Linz), together with sociologists from Krakow and Lodz (Poland). Recently, an Austrian-Czech-Slovak project of joint workshops and publications was initiated with the title “Sociological theory: Key problems and paradigms;” a volume has been published out of the first meeting (Laiferova, 2002), with contributions by D. Alijevová, J. Buncak, J. Schenk, A. Balog, G. Mozetic, E. Cyba and M. Gabriel. In 1999, Max Haller organized, in cooperation with the Ministry for Science in Vienna, an international workshop on the social aspects of European integration and the role of the social sciences therein (papers were published in Haller 2000).

In addition to their activities in several sections of the German Sociological Society, some 40 Austrian sociologists presently are active members of the *European Sociological Association*, and some 20 are engaged in the *International Sociological Association*. Several are also editorial board members of well-known international sociological journals.

In his article, Fleck also bemoans a lack of cooperation among sociologists within Austria. This assertion must be challenged, even for the sixties and seventies, but especially for the 1980’s and 1990’s. A few examples must suffice. In 1986, an *Austrian Social Science Survey* was established, following the example of the US-

General Social Survey and the German ALLBUS, in cooperation with colleagues from Graz, Vienna and Linz (Haller, Holm, Schulz); this year, the third wave will be carried out. Further, a research network on „Industrial Relations“, established by Franz Traxler within the ESA, included many colleagues from Austria as well. A very active inter-university cooperation (Vienna, Graz, Innsbruck) has been going for more than a decade in the field of sociological theory; several national and international workshops were organized in Innsbruck, Graz, and Vienna, with contributions by many Austrian sociologists (Andreas Balog, Helmut Staubmann, Johannes Schülein and others). Already in the late eighties, under the presidency of Max Haller, the *Archive for the History of Austrian Sociology* was established in Graz. In addition to conference proceedings and the journal *Oesterreichische Zeitschrift für Soziologie*, information brochures on occupational fields for sociologists outside the universities (Haller, 1989) and on Austrian sociological book publications 1981-1991 (Haller, 1992, 2004) have been published.

Certainly, the achievements of Austrian sociology as well as those of the OeGS are modest compared to those of Germany, England or other large countries. Austria is a small country with only one tenth of the inhabitants of Germany. Its sociological association has about 450 members. Austrian sociology may rather be compared with that of comparable countries such as Hungary or Switzerland and it fares well in such comparison (even if it has not produced international “stars”). In the last two decades, Austrian sociology has developed strongly at the universities, but also in many non-profit research institutions outside academia (Haller/Traxler, 1995; Hartmann, 1993). Some 100 Austrian social scientific research projects have been successfully conducted through the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Framework Programmes of the European Union. A new bibliography of sociological book publications between 1950 and 20002 includes not less than 1183 titles (Haller 2004). From this point of view, there is no need to look back nostalgically to the few sociological studies carried out in the Thirties in Austria. Certainly, quantity is no guarantee of quality. It should be a main task of Austrian sociologists for the next decades to increase the quality of research and publications and to become present with them (not with such works as that of Fleck) in international high ranking Journals and other platforms.

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