

WORKSHOP CONFERENCE ON SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY STUDIES IN HUNGARY

(Gólya Community Centre, Budapest, 3–4 January, 2013)

GÁBOR SZEGEDI¹

The two-day conference, organized by **András Novoszáth** and **Márton Fabók**, was sponsored by the European Association for the Study of Science and Technology. The conference was launched with a keynote lecture by Zsuzsa Gille, followed by five “tone-setting” lectures on broader topics (politics, nature, space, the body, the economy) and their possible links to STS. Two panels followed in the afternoon, and the next day there were three panel sessions, most panels hosting four presentations each, which added up to 45 presentations altogether. There was a colorful range of panels, from information technologies to body and spirit, from gender in science to assistive technologies and disabilities. Day one finished with a discussion on STS in Hungary and abroad, and the conference had a closing summary panel and a meeting of the organizers of the STS network.

The keynote lecture by **Zsuzsa Gille** (University of Illinois) was thought-provoking and highly entertaining. She spoke about the contemporary materialization of the exercise of power; that is, how unequal power structures can be maintained throughout the material world even if there is an equality of opportunity on an abstract political level. She presented two case studies on Hungary after the EU accession: the Hungarian paprika scandal in 2004 and the Hungarian goose liver scandal in 2008. These were two products of Hungarian agriculture that increased their market share after the EU accession; rare occurrences, as the otherwise unprepared sector received less from the CAP than expected, had to face quotas conserving low production and could not fill the many expectations of Western European food chains. Goose liver and paprika had been doing well for a few years but their reputation was seriously harmed by these scandals, and Gille argued that they were in line with the materialization of power. The EU, if taking Latour’s concept of global assemblage, based on these examples, differentiates between member states via selective regulation. The particular, socio-material networks of weaker member states within these assemblages is not taken into account – in the case of Hungary, aflatoxin control was not taken over by the EU after accession and Hungary did not have the financial means to work with these controls on its own. Thus the question arises: the socio-material networks of which countries are taken into account or are preferred in the regulations adopted by the global assemblage?

As for goose liver, Hungarian goose liver export was partially blocked – and thereby its reputation was seriously damaged – through an animal rights campaign by a German non-profit organisation. Gille cited Rancière’s theory of the ethical community replacing the political community, where the political community supposes dissent (everybody should count) while

¹ Doctoral Candidate, Central European University, Department of History

the ethical does not, as everybody is automatically part of the community. Those who are marginal are either designated by accident or by those who are destructive – a second group which is not “material” for debate, they are excluded from public discourse as they are seen as threat to society. The example for this is “Infinite justice” where the victim's viewpoint is used by the “ethical community” and even the violation of the (human) rights of others can be justified when representing the victim. As a result, the representation of nature and material goods in parliament or elsewhere is not innocent: “Who should represent the geese?” (the animal rights activists, the geese owners, the veterinarians) becomes an important question.

Gille used the concept of “post-socialism”, which she sees as being sustained by changing the structures of difference on the one hand (inequalities reduced to differences) and by the materialization of differences. As a solution, one needs to politicize materiality. It has to be acknowledged – going beyond Latour – that material can be used beyond the micro level and this idea of logistical power on a macro level (as used by Mukerji) needs to be uncovered.

The five tone-setters followed. Gábor Király spoke about nature, differentiating between three ways of constructing risks and explaining the following three constructs through the example of disasters.

- The antropocene view holds that humans have become the largest nature-influencing force, and here scientists represent an objective reality that politicians need to implement so that humans adapt to the laws of nature.
- The political ecology view says there is no nature, as societies create their own networks, which construct different kinds of “natures”. Technological changes induce natural change: the hole in the ozone layer is an example of this. The scientist is a representative, a speaker, but natural facts don't speak for themselves and so politics have to represent nature in the parliament of “things”. Natural elements, therefore, become subjects of politics: animals, and future generations.
- Relativisation of nature: e.g. Zizek's idea of nature as ideology. Nature is the representation of social order. Which societies think of what as important? The example being when the Global North tries to force its concepts onto the Global South. The question of “natural” here can only be understood in a power space. The scientist plays a political role, even if unconsciously (Zizek: “there has been no mother nature”). It is hectic, ruthless, not predictable. Disaster is natural and constant, it will always happen, technology needs to be used for preventing it.

As a closing question, Király asked: which perspective is best when we try to lay the foundations of sustainability?

Gábor Dányi gave a speech on *politics and STS*, and he presented his research on the Hungarian parliament, 2006–2010, from an STS point of view, taking into account the history of the building (a “disproportionate beast”), the old practices and concepts (like the Holy Crown) and how these methods worked in the 21st century. He checked the house rules as a manual for the political mechanism/machinery and scrutinized the way that the parliament's representation function worked.

Márton Czirfusz discussed *space and STS*, referring to complex action networks and asking questions related to these (e.g. what *distance*, *translation* or *performativity* means in such networks), or how one can interpret power relations with the help of these (is power *a priori* existent, or created by action networks?).

Emese Lafferton talked about *the body and STS*, using the case of ethnology and physical anthropology in *fin-de-siècle* Hungary. She claimed that in these projects, one can detect increasing nationalism but this was still relatively moderate in the international context and in Hungary there was a lack of “vulgar racism” that one can detect in Western anthropological

traditions. The biological definition of race was almost completely missing because the strategies that were employed at an external colonization could not be of use for the internal colonization that the Hungarians were carrying out.

Zsuzsanna Vargha's talk on *the economy and STS* was based on her work which analysed the operations of a bank before the financial crisis. She checked what software was used, how staff spoke with clients, what explanations they gave in everyday operations. She used ethnomethodology as a concept and introduced CRM, a software for customer relationship management, which custom-tailored and personalized the banks offers based on aggregate data. A hybrid client was thus constructed – technology-made flesh.

As for the various panel sessions, two samples will be mentioned here, both from Saturday.

GENDER IN SCIENCE

In the Gender in Science panel, **Eszter Nádasi** spoke about the perspectives of gender in science and provided answers to three questions: increasing the ratio of women in science, including gender within other fields of research, and the status of gender as a stand-alone interdisciplinary field of science. **Ágnes Kovács** applied Georg Lukács's Ontology of Social Being for arguing that a gender perspective could be introduced in the natural sciences as well. She used the kinetic gas theory to show how the general worldview of society at the time appeared in scientific theory, and called for a feminist metaphysics that would introduce anti-essentialism, relationalism and a criticism of dualistic thinking in the field. **Beáta Nagy** discussed the reasons for the low ratio of women in technical sciences, focusing on the masculine organization of knowledge transfer, which limit women's options in five ways: in the family; by teachers of high schools and universities; through social expectations (there is in all three a “hidden curriculum” that expects women not to enter these fields); male students of technical sciences; and workplaces that are custom-tailored for males. **Veronika Paksi's** presentation invoked the metaphor of the “leaky pipeline” to explain why women disappear easily from natural sciences. The “pipeline” refers to a rigid, institutionalized career model, which is custom-tailored for white, middle-class men of the 1950s and 1960s and hasn't changed much ever since. For more women to succeed in such careers, she believed that the following are needed: gender neutrality, professional support, flexible careers and a good work-life balance.

EXAMINATIONS AND SOCIAL CATEGORIES

In this panel, **Csaba Dupcsik** discussed a potential research project on doctor-patient communication, which would take into consideration the shifting power relations in health care, where the average difference between the schooling of doctors and patients is decreasing, the access of non-experts to professional (or seemingly professional) material has increased and the average life span has increased by 150% in the past century (therefore, non-experts have more and more experience of health care). **Vera Szabari** gave a talk on the possibility of examining sociological research (in particular: sociological elite research done after 1989) from a sociological perspective, referring to the innovation of this field: concentrating on the process of the production of knowledge and its social or community-based nature and the flexibility of the interpretation of the results. **Judit Gárdos** talked about a Roma-related research conducted by leading sociologists in Hungary in 2006, and argued that the rules that apply for professional articles (theoretical introduction, hypotheses, showing empirical data, conclusions, comparisons, interpretations, outlook) were disrespected and there were a great deal of *ad hoc* explanations. She maintained that the

research used knowledge elements besides the object of scrutiny, and she asked the question: why isn't there true scientific research on stereotypes in Hungary? **Barna Szamosi** discussed the identification of Roma in Hungarian medical genetics discourse. His research is based on interviews with human geneticists, who try to locate Roma as a separate group for research, as certain ethnicities/populations can have an increased incidence of certain illnesses (e.g. Tay-Sachs disease, which has a higher frequency among Ashkenazi Jews in the US). The possible problem with such research is identifying Roma: family-tree research, last-name analysis is not necessarily reliable. Those who argue for using race/ethnicity-based classifications in genetic research say that these can be used in a manner that is as objective and value-neutral as possible, and that the research outcomes (like in the case of Iceland or Cyprus) serve the interests of the population.



Márton Fabók's introductory words



The Gólya (small building to the right)



The building next to the workshop venue



Let's start the registration!