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A CONSTRUCTIONIST APPROACH TO SOCIAL PROBLEMS IN AN EAST-WEST COMPARATIVE SETTING

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Abstract. The article discusses experiences arising from a comparative study on the prevalence and perception of social problems in six countries and regions around the Baltic Sea. During the study process the original theoretical framework - the constructionist approach to social problems – has had to be reconsidered. This approach treats social problems discourse as consisting of claims-making activities by individuals or groups. In its strict form it does not allow for the analysis of the values, interests and social conditions underlying the claims. During the study of the formerly socialist countries it became particularly clear that these restrictions of the approach are not plausible; the same also applies when Western Europe is studied. Instead, elements of a new approach are suggested, based on Berger's and Luckmann's theory of the social construction of reality, and on Gramsci's theory of the formation of revolutionary consciousness. Common sense is proposed as a central concept in the analysis.

This article is intended to serve two purposes. Starting from a brief description of a comparative empirical study and its initial theoretical approach, it will progress to a discussion on the theoretical lessons from that study. Thus, it will first give a short presentation of an ongoing comparative research project called The Baltica Study, in which I participate.

In our study we are attempting to compare the prevalence and perception of social problems in the nine countries situated on the shores of the Baltic Sea. It was initiated in 1990 by the Nordic Council for Alcohol and Drug Research (NAD). The study consists of four subprojects tackling different aspects of the common research problem. These include the compilation and analysis of comparative statistics, a survey on the population's perception of various social problems, group interviews with people supposedly having influence on the definition of social problems, and a comparison of studies on the national presses' notions of social problems. Our first report, a general presentation of social

problems and previous research carried out in this field in the Baltic Sea region, was published in 1992 (Simpura and Tigerstedt 1992). More recently one of the substudies, the comparative analysis of newspapers, has also resulted in the publication of a collection of articles (Lagerspetz 1994). Those interested in the empirical results of our study hitherto are advised to consult these two volumes. During the research process, however, many theoretical questions concerning the applicability of our original theoretical approach, the constructionist approach to social problems, have asserted themselves. In the latter part of this article I will discuss these questions and also attempt to formulate a theoretical framework for comparative research on social problems. This is the second, and more important, purpose of this paper.

Our study has been loosely based on a constructionist approach to social problems. As it progressed, however, some of the limitations of this approach have become increasingly noticeable. This may even be seen as quite a predictable development: a comparative setting is often helpful in bringing basic methodological and theoretical issues to the forefront (Ragin [1987] 1989:viii). Focusing on such issues may in many cases lead to a reconsideration of the original approach. It should be added that when comparisons are drawn between the capitalist and former socialist countries, the theoretical problems encountered are of an even deeper nature than when more similar societies are examined. The tacit assumptions about society that underlie every theoretical approach are likely to be challenged in even more varied ways than usual. The integration of analyses of social change, both in the East and the West, into a common theoretical framework should be seen as a major target of sociological theory today.

But our choice of constructionism as the initial theoretical framework may also be considered in a way inevitable. First, it is the major approach used in social problems research today. Second, it is in one important respect superior to any objectivistic approach, if the aim is to make cross-societal comparisons: it does not proceed from a fixed definition of which phenomena should be viewed as social problems. Instead, it is based on the notion that in every society these will be defined by separate processes of construction. This means that in different countries the problems that have greatest relevance for the members of the society in question will be treated by the researchers. In this way, one common drawback of comparative settings can be avoided: the danger that the research fails to address those questions that are perceived as most important by members of the separate societies.

1. The constructionist approach to social problems

A presentation of the constructionist approach will be facilitated by contrasting it with two other important schools of research into social problems. These are the functionalist and the value-conflict approaches.

The functionalist approach to social problems may be described as objectivist. It aims at showing ways in which some phenomena represent an objective threat to the general well-being of society, as defined by its capability of realising "the collective purposes and individual objectives of its members" (Merton [1961] 1971:820). The task of sociological research is, then, to pass a "technical judgment about the workings of a social system".

It is, however, very hard to find objective criteria for such judgments. The problems tend to be defined differently in different societies, in any one society during different historical epochs, and even by different groups inside any one society. In fact, functionalist argumentation is engaged in assumptions that are not merely technical in nature, but moral and ideological. As Mills (1959:25–40) points out, functionalist theorists treat both "the social system" and what is presented as the heart of it, "the normative structure", as given and as having no internal conflicts. This is a standpoint that is not based on empirical investigation, but on a certain ideological view of society.

This view was already challenged in the 1920s and '30s in the area of social problems research by the value conflict school (Spector and Kitsuse [1977] 1987:40–58). They noted that social problems cannot be defined purely as objective conditions, but as definitions created by members of society. These, in turn, are results of value judgments. The crucial concern becomes the processes of collective definition – how the society "comes to recognize its social problems" (Blumer 1971:300).

If we label the functionalist theory of social problems as objectivist, the value conflict school may be called subjectivist. The same label certainly applies to the constructionist approach as it was first formulated by Spector and Kitsuse ([1977] 1987). It should be noted here that, despite its name, any direct connections between that approach and the social constructionism of Berger and Luckmann ([1966] 1981) are almost non-existent – at least, as far as one can judge from the total absence of references to and quotations from Berger's and Luckmann's volume.

Spector's and Kitsuse's point of departure is that social problems are *"the activities of individuals or groups making assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative conditions"* (ibid.: 75). This definition explicitly shifts the focus of interest from the problematic phenomena themselves to the claims made about them. The problems are viewed essentially as constructs, i.e. as results of deliberate processes of definition and interpretation. It is the claims-making processes that have become the principal research interest of this approach.

The constructionists have criticised the functional approach most heavily; however, they also wish to highlight the differences between themselves and the value conflict school. One important difference is that they *do not consider values and interests to be legitimate concepts* for explaining the course of the definitional processes. Motives, values and interests are "themselves part of the phenomenon

that must be explained" (Spector and Kitsuse [1977] 1987:95 f.). Another constructionist criticism of the value conflict school is that the latter is accused of not being fully consistent when defining its object of study. If social problems are studied as results of collective definition processes, one should deliberately refrain from any study of the so-called objective conditions. These should be considered irrelevant to the analysis (ibid.: 76). Ultimately, this "strict" constructionist programme sees the rhetoric of claims-making as the actual field of research of the sociology of social problems. It should be noted that even within the constructionist camp this view has not gained unanimous acceptance. The so-called "contextual constructionists" (Best 1989) argue that the actual social conditions should be treated as the background against which the claims presented about them can be interpreted. "After all, how can an analyst who refuses to presume anything about a case identify its important features (Best 1993:137)?"

2. Mass media and social problems in the East and in the West

The constructionist focus on collective definition processes implies that the study of mass media will lie at the very heart of social problems research. The first substudy of the Baltica Study to be completed was a comparison of newspaper analyses from six of the nine countries and regions around the Baltic Sea – Finland, St. Petersburg, Estonia, Poland, Denmark and Sweden. Our aim was to compare the press attention given to different putative social problems, and the supposed causes and proposed solutions to the problems.

Our analyses were concerned with, firstly, the relative attention given to a variety of problematic issues. Secondly, the quasi-theories (cf. Hewitt and Hall 1973) that lay behind their presentation as problems were inspected with the help of an analytic division of their putative reasons and proposed solutions on three levels of action: the individual, the institutional, and the political and structural level. An important reason for the adoption of this division was that statements about the reasons and solutions on the different levels have different implications with regard to the political and economic system. When the quasi-theory in question presents the problem as an inevitable outcome of the prevailing political order, the claim also contains a serious challenge to its legitimacy. When, on the other hand, factors solely on the individual level (e. g., attitudes of individuals) are blamed, the problem is de-politicised. Thus the results will help us to get a picture of the legitimacy of the economic and political system and the newspapers' role in maintaining or undermining it. One of the starting-points of our study was that the crises of both socialism and the welfare state consist largely of a lack of legitimacy.

A third line of inquiry consisted of more detailed analyses of the argumentation connected with some selected problems, e.g., criminality, drug

abuse and alcohol-related problems. Depending on the structure of the press in various countries, we studied either a large sample of the national press or only one leading newspaper.

In spite of this variation in the research materials, some general conclusions may be drawn. The comparison shows, first of all, that the so-called traditional social problems received only slight attention in the editorials and comment articles. In all societies, most attention was given to economic and political concerns. Other problems received a relatively large proportion of problem mentions only when they were made political for one reason or another. This was the case with alcohol problems in the Soviet Union during Gorbachev's campaign against alcoholism, or with environmental problems in Estonia (and other Central and Eastern European socialist countries) in the late 1980s. In both cases, the problem in question came to be associated with other, more thorough attempts to change society: the former with the *perestroika* policy, the latter with the national and political emancipation of peoples in the socialist countries. The problems became testing-grounds for society's potential for change; as such, they were carriers of great symbolic value. This position they owed primarily to the limited opportunities for public expression of other politically important issues. The political relevance of these problems in the formerly socialist countries was also underlined by their frequent discussion in terms of political and structural changes. By way of contrast, the Nordic press tended to discuss social problems mainly with reference to reasons and solutions on the institutional level. Here, alcohol-related problems were an important exception, as also in the Nordic countries, their solutions were connected with deeper political changes.

Great changes in the relative proportion of problem mentions seem to occur only in times of profound political change. In the Nordic countries it is commonplace to speak of a crisis of the Scandinavian welfare state model. In practice, the crisis is represented by a challenge to adjust this model to the practices of the European Union. As noted in one of our studies, an article on the discussion of alcohol problems in Sweden (Olsson 1994), the discrepancy between the two models is clearly visible in the field of alcohol policies. This has heightened the interest of the mass media in alcohol issues. Furthermore, alcohol policy is a field where the ideology of the welfare state clashes very concretely with the principles of free trade. The Nordic model is built on the idea of collective responsibility for the well-being of all citizens; market liberalism stresses individual sovereignty. Public health and private pleasure seem to be competing for primacy (cf. Sulkunen 1992:147–162).

However, the changes in the content of the Nordic mass media seem rather marginal when compared with those that occurred in the late 1980s in the socialist countries. In these countries the economic, political and social crises were accompanied by a clash between competing definitions of reality. Not only in political ideology or economy, but in every sphere of social life the official definitions were challenged by political mass movements. By way of contrast, in a

society where the prevailing definitions go unchallenged, any new phenomena tend to be incorporated into them (cf. Berger and Luckmann [1966] 1981). This is probably the main difference between the definition processes in societies on the opposite shores of the Baltic Sea: in the Nordic countries such ideological clashes are visible only in some spheres of public life, such as alcohol policies. In the post-socialist countries they have been of an overwhelming nature.

3. Difficulties in the original approach

What then are the implications of our study with respect to the constructionist approach to social problems? The results discussed above should have made clear that changes in the social problems discourse cannot be understood without reference to culture and ideology. A state of affairs can be defined by the members of a given society as harmful or detrimental only against the background of what is culturally considered to be the "normal", "desirable" situation. Moreover, the social problems discourse in Central and Eastern Europe did not merely reflect the changing political and social situation: it also played a central part in the change. In fact, the revolutionary mass movements were often initiated as responses to claims presented on some social problems. This was the case of the environmental movements that emerged in Latvia and Estonia during 1986 and 1987, i.e., as the forerunners of the Singing Revolutions of 1988 in those same countries.

Placing the social problems discourse in such larger contexts has, however, been avoided most often by the constructionist approach. This can be partly explained by the fact that this approach has been developed mainly in the United States, where the impact of cultural and ideological cleavages on the development of society has been less obvious. But one further important reason for their deliberate restriction of the scope of research is the strict constructionists' wish to avoid what they see as the most serious shortcoming of both the functionalist and the value conflict approaches: the adoption of an "expert" role in passing judgment on the "rationality", "value", "sensibleness" etc. of the members' formulations of social problems or lack thereof (Ibarra and Kitsuse 1993:27). Instead, they wish to treat claims on social problems *as texts,* i.e., without any references to how they have come into being, and what their future impact could be. It is *the rhetoric of claims-making* that becomes the actual object of research.

The strict constructionists are quite right when they point to the inevitable, but seldom acknowledged, subjectivity of the supposedly technical judgments social researchers are expected to produce. Their solution to the problem is to retreat into a deliberately restricted, more easily definable world of reified texts. In other words: *they have not given up the ideal of an objective, fundamentally technical social science, but they think that they have found a field of research in which it is still applicable.* Although they repeatedly stress the need to "deprivilege" the

sociologist's perspective, in practice, they prefer to preserve the role of expert, merely defining it in a new way. Although it is not without a certain logic, the solution seems to raise new problems.

First of all, it is hard to see how strict constructionists themselves could reach their supposedly objective perspective if one really starts from the notion that *all* knowledge is socially constructed. A study of the rhetoric of claims-making processes still presupposes some cultural background knowledge. The categories employed in analysing the rhetorical devices are by no means universal or culturally neutral. This cultural background knowledge applied by the researcher is also open to criticism. The familiar accusation of passing one's own judgments on the members' definitions may again be levelled against his or her interpretations. When the data (rhetoric) is being collected and analysed, the meaning is transformed too. In other words, these are not neutral actions (Troyer 1993:124).

When studying social problems discourse in the formerly socialist societies, the refusal to treat the social and political context of the processes of problem construction becomes even more problematic. It is questionable whether the perspective of claims-making activities can be applied at all to the study of these societies before the final years of the 1980s. In socialist countries the public "claims" about social problems were not presented by "individuals or groups", but they were typically results of campaigns led from above.

The whole social problems discourse of the Soviet Union and its European vassal states may be seen as an infinite row of campaigns: NEP, electrification, collectivisation, revelance of bourgeois nationalism, recruitment of women to industrial work, etc. Memorably, the *perestroika* policy started out as an anti-alcohol campaign in June 1985. One typical way of setting up a campaign followed the model described by Høyer and al. (1993:190 f.). On receiving orders from above, a newspaper would find a person under whose name to publish an article on the problem chosen as the target of the campaign. After some time the leading organs of the Party would announce their full support for the initiative presented in the article. Before long a number of letters from "simple working people" supporting the campaign would be published. The campaign might also be directed against a particular individual. Simultaneously with the campaign, the authorities could make use of repressive measures against the individual in question. The materials used in the campaigns were not always written by the persons announced as signatories; and even if they were, they could be altered without permission.

The overall political situation and the local Party leadership's attitude towards the campaign could influence how literally the plans of the central power were followed in the different socialist countries and in the Soviet republics. Political intrigues and struggles between Moscow and the local Communist Party leadership could play a crucial role. It was only through rumours that the public would occasionally get to hear about them. Repressing and watering down the

campaigns was sometimes possible; but this form of influence was never made public.

Socialist campaigning was reminiscent in form of the claims-making processes as described by constructionist theorists, with its "claims", "citizens' initiatives", etc. In a way, the course of a socialist campaign was, however, the opposite: the decisions were made first, and only afterwards were attempts made to influence public opinion. Even if they were not convinced, citizens did at least learn the most recent form of political correctness, the adoption of which they had to simulate. The reasons for initiating a campaign could be ideological, political or economic; in many cases they were connected with a need to legitimate the political and economic system. They were not really results of claims-making activities by independent social actors, although they were often presented as such. Instead, they were part of the official discourse, which in turn was covertly opposed by the unofficial discourse of the civil society. This may be seen as a specific characteristic of the socialist states, where criticism against the régime was presented either covertly through the cultural life, or in private and semi-public arenas.

The difference between capitalist and socialist societies in this respect ought not, however, to be exaggerated. It was Antonio Gramsci (1971) who, in his *Prison Notebooks* of 1929–35, originally introduced the notion of "contradictory consciousness"; he was, of course, referring to the consciousness of a worker in a capitalist – not a socialist – society. He argued that workers are torn between the hegemonic ideology maintained by the state and by institutions of civil society - among them, the mass media. In their consciousness the dominant conceptions sit uneasily alongside dissenting ones (Abercrombie 1980:25). Nor are they very far removed from the Orwellian "double-think".

When studying mass media it should be remembered that even in capitalism the claims-makers can rarely be treated as the mouthpieces of an average or "mass" consciousness. Instead, they tend to be representatives of political, economic, or organisational élites. According to many observers, the gap between the consciousnesses of élites and masses is rapidly widening in the so-called Western democracies too. This was clearly evidenced by the outcome of the Maastricht Treaty plebiscites in Denmark and France in the summer of 1992 (Hartley 1992/93), and by growing suspicion of the EU in other European countries. A large proportion of the population revolts against a development applauded by élites over many years, moving the decisions still further from those affected by them, and hiding the power behind an even more total anonymity. The different social groups' unequal access to mass media is usually forgotten by constructionist theorists, with their American-spirited faith in democracy and freedom of speech. Similarily to functionalists, they seem to believe that a consensus on values is a basic characteristic of society. Accordingly, any conflict is bound to be more apparent than real.

In search of a new approach

Above, I pointed to two important shortcomings of the Spector-Ibarra-Kitsuse version of social constructionism, both of which became apparent in the course of our comparative study. Firstly, I discussed their deliberate delimitation of the legitimate object of study, which I interpreted as a result of their willingness to preserve the "objectivity" of their research, in spite of their emphasis on the constructedness of all knowledge. Not only is this position internally controversial, but it demands that the researcher ignore what are often the most interesting parts of the processes he or she is studying – the social, political and cultural context. Secondly, I pointed to their failure to take into account the power relations that determine which definitions of reality get an opportunity to become parts of the public discourse. In the following, this aspect will be touched upon in a discussion on hegemony.

Starting from the same notion of the constructedness of all knowledge, an alternative theoretical approach to the processes discussed above can, however, be formulated.

Here, one may turn to Berger and Luckmann ([1966] 1981), whose book on *The Social Construction of Reality* presents an important approach within the sociology of knowledge. As I have already mentioned, it is also known as social constructionism. In contrast to Spector, Kitsuse and Ibarra, who opt for a deliberate narrowing of the field to be studied, they define "everything that in society passes for 'knowledge'" as their object of research. In other words, they also offer devices for analysis of such phenomena as are usually referred to as culture, beliefs, values, norms and ideologies. In society everything that passes for knowledge is incorporated in a symbolic universe, which is theoretically the "highest", most elaborate layer of the overall stock of knowledge. The symbolic universe has a powerful nomic function, "putting everything in its right place". In this way, it orders and thereby legitimates everyday roles, priorities, and operating procedures; it provides the ultimate legitimation of the institutional order (Berger and Luckmann [1966] 1981:116 f.).

This method of analytically viewing knowledge as organised in different layers of consciousness is, in fact, closely reminiscent of the concept of Gramsci (Kilminster 1979:166 ff.). A second common feature between Gramsci's writings and the social constructionism of Berger and Luckmann is that both underline the connection between knowledge and social praxis. For this reason, commonsense knowledge assumes a special position as the form of knowledge that is most directly connected with practical life. Berger's and Luckmann's ([1966] 1981:39) definition of common sense comes close to that of Gramsci's: it *"contains innumerable pre- and quasi-scientific interpretations about everyday reality, which it takes for granted"*. Gramsci stresses common sense's potential to resist and conflict with the hegemonic ideology that the ruling class imposes on other classes. Somewhat differently, Berger and Luckmann in turn tend to treat the

different layers of consciousness as mutually coherent – this gives their theory a kind of conservative flavour. But they too admit that in a society there may be heretical groups, challenging the "taken-for-granted" nature of the symbolic universe. The more powerful group then applies its own conceptual machinery to neutralising the threat to the institutional order posed by an alternative definition of reality (ibid.:124-127).

Adopting Gramsci's concept, we might now describe this kind of situation by saying that the *hegemonic group is able to impose its own definitions of reality on other groups*. This would give us a definition of hegemony in Berger's and Luckmann's terms. Similarily, political legitimacy could mean that *the actions and aspirations of a political élite are backed up by their incorporation in the hegemonic symbolic universe*. It seems that the two theoretical approaches have more in common that is usually recognised, and also that they offer theoretical devices that allow for an analysis of problem construction processes both in the capitalist and in the formerly socialist societies.

The crucial difference between socialism and capitalism does not lie in the fact that the latter allows "freedom of speech" and the former did not, but in the fact that with capitalism the rulers also tend to hold a hegemonic position. In spite of the claims to the contrary by the leadership in the socialist countries, the unanimous acceptance of their rule by the population, as witnessed by Soviet-type "elections", was in most countries never more than a mere Potemkin village. If hegemony is treated as the "intellectual and moral leadership" of a group in power or striving for power (Gramsci 1971:57), we can conclude that *hegemony never existed during the real socialist régime*. The very speed of its breakdown may serve as evidence of this. With capitalism the rulers attract fundamental criticism only from the margins of society. The critics include, e.g., some of the new social movements, populist and traditionalist groupings, and perhaps even the tabloid press, with its carnival-like disrespect for politicians, authorities and celebrities. Although their critical standpoints are rarely given serious attention by the mainstream mass media, it is still possible that they are deeply rooted in the population's commonsense knowledge. And it is common sense that guides people's actions in their everyday lives. It also ultimately determines how people interpret what they see, hear and read in the media.

The importance of common sense in understanding the liberalisation process of Central and Eastern Europe becomes clear when we analyse the development of the public discourse on social problems. It may be illustrated by developments in Estonia, as reflected in the results of the Baltica Study (Lagerspetz and Hanhinen 1994; Lagerspetz 1996). Here, a notable radicalisation took place in the late 1980s. New issues were discussed which had not previously been treated in public as problems. Furthermore, a steadily growing number of problems were treated as direct consequences of the socialist economic and political system. To some extent, the radicalisation may be put down to the gradual abolition of censorship.

But there was also an internal development in the discourse, which I would depict as a *theoretical elaboration of common sense.*

In the socialist countries, the commonsense views of various of society's grievances - including, e.g., bureaucracy, poor management of the economy, and lack of legal security – were diametrically opposed to the official definitions. In private discussion and underground publicity, these grievances were treated as the inevitable outcome of the socialist régime and Russian domination. At the same time, up to the late 1980s there was no sign of an end to, or of a significant liberalisation of the régime. This also means that no *cure* for the problematic situations could be offered.

As Hewitt and Hall (1973) note, the presence of a cure is essential for a problematic situation to be defined as a social problem. One cannot conceive of, e.g., an earthquake as a social problem, unless one has a means of predicting and possibly preventing it from happening. Likewise, various practices conceived of as detrimental by the commonsense knowledge of the people who lived in socialist societies, could not be treated as social problems until there was some realistic hope of attaining change. Only after 1985 and the *perestroika* policy did this kind of hope emerge.

When looking for possibilities of creating a revolutionary consciousness, Gramsci put his hope in common sense. As indicated above, he noted that the consciousness of a worker in a capitalist society contains several elements that are critical of that society. These are located on the level of common sense. However, common sense is fragmentary and incoherent, and as such cannot form the sole basis of revolutionary consciousness. What Gramsci advocated was not the imposing of revolutionary ideology on the masses from above by an avant-garde party, but "to renovate and make 'critical' an already existing activity" (Gramsci 1971:330 f.). In other words, the prerequisite for the success of a revolutionary movement lies in its capability of organising and refining the critical elements of common sense.

This is exactly what happened in those socialist societies where political changes were initiated by large popular movements (obviously, the balance between initiative from the grass roots and from above was different in the different countries concerned). The opportunity for open debate – the *glasnost'* policy – generated discussion in the course of which the existing critical elements of common sense were gradually developed into explicit political programmes, aiming at a comprehensive restructuring of society. In practice, this happened through the treatment of new issues as social problems, applying quasi-theories with specified views on the causes, cures and definitions of the exact nature of the problems. The claims on those new social problems, in turn, triggered the revolutions.

4. Conclusions

The constructionist approach to social problems (as proposed by Spector and Kitsuse) has much merit as it underlines the importance of definitional processes with regard to the establishment of different issues as social problems. At the same time, it is much too insensitive to the cultural and political settings involved in these processes. In particular, it totally neglects the issue of the rootedness of different definitions in the commonsense knowledge of the population. Moreover, it ignores the importance of power relations in shaping the prevailing definitions of social problems. The public discourse on social problems is presented as leading a peculiar life of its own. This perspective is insufficient when we try to understand the dynamics of social problems discourse in the formerly socialist societies, or even in Western Europe today.

What we need now is to relate this discourse to the overall political and cultural orientations of the public, as reflected by commonsense knowledge. The theoretical basis for such an approach can be sought from the other version of social constructionism, as formulated by Berger and Luckmann ([1966] 1981), and from Gramsci's notions on hegemony and on the development of revolutionary consciousness as an elaboration of the critical elements of common sense. This task, of course, calls for more flexibility in choosing the empirical material to be analysed. It involves dealing not only with public discourse that is explicitly connected with claims on social problems, but with any material that gives the researcher access to the culture through which the members of society perceive the world. This material may include fiction, everyday interaction, jokes etc. – i.e., genres that represent both the hegemonic discourse, and those spheres of life where common sense might produce fragments of an alternative discourse. In this way, conflicting values and interests, and the various means of acquiring and maintaining hegemony – and counteracting it! – are brought back into the analysis. But this broadening of the research material also means giving up the illusion of objectivity that Ibarra and Kitsuse (1993) were trying to create by limiting themselves to the analysis of public rhetorics on social problems. In carrying out research on the processes of hegemonisation as well, the researcher will have to actively search for and "construct" the controversies between common sense and hegemonic discourse; he will by no means remain passively registering the claims that are presented in social problems in public. However, I do not think that we would at the same time be forced to adopt an epistemological relativism of the kind that would render meaningless any statements on social reality. Rather, we should follow the spirit of Mannheimian "relationism" and, *while acknowledging the constructedness and inherent subjectivity of any sociological research,* give pre-eminence "to that perspective which gives evidence of the greatest comprehensiveness and the greatest fruitfulness in dealing with empirical materials (Mannheim [1936] 1979:271)". I admit that what is

meant by "fruitfulness" is not unambiguous; but solutions to methodological problems seldom are.

Through this kind of approach, the social problems theory is also freed from its isolation from other disciplines of sociology; in fact, it becomes a central part of a general theory of social, political and cultural change. The need for such a new approach is particularly obvious when the changes in the social problems discourse of Central and Eastern Europe are studied. Nevertheless, there is no reason why research in the former "West" should be any less ambitious.

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