

Call for Papers: “Minority science” in the short 20th century: Imagining science from the margins of academia. March 30-31, Prague.

Discussion published by Jan Surman on Monday, October 3, 2022

When the roars of World War I went silent, the process of redrawing social, cultural, and geographic borders began. Gradually, continental empires seemed a thing of the past, and the idea of the national state seemed to have prevailed – even if overseas empires still remained strong. Socialism became a legitimate approach in academia, with various versions in different countries. Women were increasingly accepted as academics and researchers, a process proceeding at different speeds across the globe.

The process of redrawing and rethinking was obviously a slow one, with a wide geographical variety. In Central Europe, states born from empires were multicultural but not automatically open to scholars of other national identifications/loyalties. Czechoslovakia, home to Czech, Slovak, German, Ukrainian, Russian, and Jewish scholars, can be contrasted with Poland, where more Ukrainian scholars taught at clandestine institutions than at official ones. Other countries, like France or Great Britain, retained their colonies and followed policies of imperial othering. Depending on the country and political situation, Socialist scholars could be part of the academia or expelled from it due to their convictions (Horthy-Era Hungary or McCarthy-Era USA). In Socialist countries, on the contrary, liberal but also conservative scholars were excluded or at least othered.

While historians often look at these processes based on the binary exclusion versus inclusion, others have claimed that being an “other” can also be a privilege, allowing a more distant and critical perception of one’s surrounding society. Michel Foucault, Simone Weil, and Jacques Derrida are examples of scholars for whom the outsider position is more a blessing than a curse. A less prominent example is Stefan Balej (Stepan Balej), Polish-Ukrainian psychologist, the author of a number of publications on personality and science. “Minority,” “other,” or “otherness” are of course not innocent concepts, yet they are not set in stone either; they mix legality, ascription, self-perception, numbers, statistics, and individual biographies. Therefore, an integral part of our endeavour is to uncover how (academic) power relations are entangled with those in the society at large.

Our conference wants to look at how cultural outsiders, émigrés, refugees, and members of minorities imagined the sciences and their own position in them. We are interested in contributions discussing scholars who were (and/or regarded themselves as) outsiders/minorities on account of their cultural, gender, political or social identifications. Questions include, but are not limited to:

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- How did minority scholars see their position within academic scholarship and its institutions? How did they define their minority-ness and otherness (e.g. representatives of “small nations” seeing themselves as a minor part of international science, members of ethnic and/or national minorities within nationalising states, etc.).
- What strategies did these scholars pursue to meet their goals (epistemic, political, career-oriented)?
- What alternative epistemologies did minority scholars develop or propose? How did they respond to epistemic proposals by mainstream scholars?
- How did minority institutions position themselves to the state-dominant institutions?
- How did minority and majority scholars differ in their strategies of asserting credibility, building networks, publishing, etc.? For instance, did they demonstratively publish in mainstream media to assert their status within the state, did they search for alternatives, or both?
- Can we talk about the specificity of a “minority science,” and how can the mainstream science narrative – our received narrative – be challenged through it?

Please send your abstract of no more than 350 words and a short biographical note by 15 October 2022 to Jan Surman (surman@mua.cas.cz).

The conference is organised by the project “Images of science” in Czechoslovakia 1918-1945-1968, financed by Lumina Quaeruntur fellowship of the Czech Academy of Sciences and hosted by the Masaryk Institute and Archives of the Czech Academy of Sciences.

The conference will take place 30–31 March 2023, in Prague, Czech Republic. Travel costs and accommodations for speakers will be provided. We plan the conference to be in person. Language of the conference is English.