

MEETINGS OF PSYCHOLOGISTS FROM THE DANUBIAN COUNTRIES: A LITTLE STEP TOWARD EUROPEAN UNIFYING PROCESSES*

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Abstract: Elementary characteristics are used to describe traditional professional events - not conferences or seminars - but Meetings of Psychologists of the Danube Countries (1967-1993). After the first three held in Slovakia, they then took place successively in all the countries (excepting Romania) through which the mighty European river - the Danube - flows. They were attended by foremost experts from research institutes (Academies of Sciences) and Universities - over 500 in all. The study describes the strategic import of the Meetings and selectively also some of their gains and results.

Key words: psychology in Central-European countries, communication between "Western" and "Eastern" psychologists, Institute of Experimental Psychology SASc.

Among items of information appearing most frequently in European mass media are certainly those that relate to the unification of the various states of this continent into that unit dubbed the European Union. Naturally, the term Union has diverse forms and carries various connotations: from the material, up to the spiritual. But can science be also unified? - moreover, when as multifarious as psychology is?

Whether it can and in what - is attested to by the historical argument which we present here in a condensed version. May we observe that an attempt at unifying the psychological communities took place at a time of a politico-military division of Europe by the practically impenetrable Iron Curtain, hence in a period before the birth of a Little or a Greater European Union.

ABOUT THE ORIGIN

If it be true that everything in this world has its originator, then I thank Providence for my having been initiator of the Meetings of Psychologists from the Danubian Countries (MPDC). But I refuse the designation in the singular - founder. Together with me, the co-founders of MPDC gradually were H. Rohracher (the 1st MPDC), G.A. Lienert (the 2nd and all the others) and B.F. Lomov (the 3rd and most of the others).

As is generally known, the first three took place in Slovakia at the Smolenice castle in 1967, 1970, 1973. The course of these discussions, the resulting published proceedings, as also the international response to them, all justified the organizing of these meetings with an initiating tradition. This is attested to by written documents, including the opening addresses at subsequent meetings. From time to time, it

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was recalled how the "Smolenice babe" grows and proceeds toward maturity.

The genre and spirit of MPDC were of course shaped by their further organizers, viz. P. Rökusfalvy (4th MPDC in Hungary in 1978), B.F. Lomov already referred to and his Russian colleagues (5th MPDC in Russia in 1980), H. Huber (6th MPDC in Austria in 1983) F. Genov (7th MPDC in Bulgaria in 1985); G.A. Lienert - likewise already mentioned - and G. Bäumlér, R. Fuchs (8th MPDC in the BRD in 1987), V. Pečjak (9th MPDC in Slovenia in 1989). The MPDC received an even enhanced significance from the activities (and intellectual drive) of such outstanding personalities as were W. Metzger, I. Kohler, Kai von Fieand, L. Kardos, J. Nuttin, V. Nebylitsin, J. Rutenfranz, J. Zubek, A. Jurovský, V. Tardy, I. Šípoš and others - I have named only some of those who have already left our ranks.

MOTIVATION OF THEIR ORIGIN

Due to the euphoria of Dubček's socialism with a human face, some rifts appeared in the Iron Curtain in Czecho-Slovakia - a sad consequence of World War II. We, too, tried to exploit one of them at the Institute of Experimental Psychology, SASc.; our efforts to break through the imposed isolation, to establish professional, but also personal contacts at least with our closest neighbors and also try to get on to the international stage, came to be a starting motivation and our driving force in organizing the MPDC. This and also further activities corresponded with our endeavors to get free of the methodology deriving from the harness of the so-called "true" ideology.

Thank God, this motivation overlapped to a certain extent with the aspiration of our southern neighbors - to promote European

traditions of psychology against the ruling hegemony "through Ocean Psychology". To our gratification, sincere interest began to grow also in psychologists from the other side of the Iron Curtain, particularly those from the German region, in the character and results of work of psychologists on the eastern side - and this not only of Czecho-Slovaks (particularly those from the Institute of Experimental Psychology, SASc.), but also Polish, Russian and others.

PROFILATION

The initial designation "Zusammenkunft" and the subsequent "Meetings" instead of Conference or Symposium, had right from the beginnings its meaning. The MPDC were not intended to be exclusively scientific-professional undertakings, but also human *rapprochements* among familiar and unknown promoters of academic psychology in Central Europe. This design, quite risky at the time (seeing the Iron Curtain drawn across Europe), received a broader endorsement through the entry of Soviet psychologists, especially into the 3rd MPDC; e.g., its acceptance by the then political "élite" in the ČSSR. By the way, it had originally been presumed that the MPDC would always be held in Slovakia and that in the then "Hyde Park of Slovak science" - at the Smolenice castle. But (fortunately) that was not to be. Other colleagues - primarily those from Hungary - already applied for the task to organize the very second meeting. And thus, the torch was passed on in relays to further representatives from the Danubian countries. Within this international or intercultural context, the MPDC won several specificities that may be expressed in a triple characteristic: the MPDC were not solely scientific-professional, but also

social and cultural events. These three basic features of the MPDC manifested themselves in a complex manner. For instance, the professional presentations were received and judged in a friendly atmosphere, the social character was intensively reinforced by a practically week-long stay of all the participants under the same roof; the cultural side included sight-seeing tours of memorable sites in the given country, etc. The participants certainly cherish recollections of their visit to "Velkí fran-tiškáni" (at the Great Franciscans') in Bratislava, sailing on the Hungarian sector of the Danube, the Russian Golden Circle of cultural monuments, the Corinthian wine road, swimming in the Bulgarian Black Sea, the Munich "Oktober Fest" and the concert at the "Bauertheater", from Slovenian Marinka picnic, the unique wood carving gems by Master Pavol of Levoča, etc.

One more remark concerning profilation: the designation Danubian Countries does not on design correspond to the geographical demarcation. It was a strategic term expressing the historical, natural connection primarily of Central-European regions with the mighty Danube river - however, countries artificially divided along geopolitical lines into so-called Eastern and so-called Western.

ORGANIZATION AND PARTICIPANTS

Not only the individuals already mentioned, but also institutes and institutions of the different host countries organized and materially ensured the various MPDC. They were the ones who invited visitors from abroad as guests and played host to the participants (e.g., over 50 such guests from both banks of the Danube took part in the first three MPDC in Slovakia).

The organizers, as a rule personal friends of the initiator of these meetings, consulted with him over the program and the invitation of participants. Everyone of them evidently expended maximum efforts to ensure an original social and cultural content of the MPDC, spent whole days and even parts of nights with them and the congress material also included various souvenirs.

The majority of the participants from the so-called Eastern zone came from research institutes and those from the Western parts were mostly members of university staffs. Several of them gradually formed the core of the MPDC, others, sometimes the majority, came from the organizing countries, but here and there, also "sporadic" visitors attended. But it may be said that further and further participants attached themselves to the core members as if to a snowball, thus giving rise to informal groupings and, in a large measure, to personality unifications of some hundred European psychologists at a time when ideas of Europeanism were thought of solely as a hazy vision. In merrily singing charabanc a ditty could be heard that came to be considered as some sort of a hymn of Danubian psychologists.

SCIENTIFIC CONTRIBUTION

At this time, I am attempting a more detailed evaluation of the scientific and professional results of the past ten MPDC and this also on the basis of data from a survey which I sent out in May 2001 to a score of the "core" personalities of this informal association of Central-European psychologists. Hence, I do not intend to anticipate the conclusions that a study of the sources and information of participants will yield. Yet, from my position of initiator (and head of the Institute of

Experimental Psychology, SASc.), I cannot help making some preliminary statements regarding the subject.

1. The MPDC initiated a group penetration of academic and further Slovak psychologists at least into the Central-European region; information about the first meetings of psychologists from the Danubian region could be heard not only by neighbors right behind the Iron Curtain, but also in France, Italy and even in the USA.

2. While in the 70s-80s, due to political and currency limitations, only a few individuals from Slovakia succeeded to travel to the MPDC held in the "capitalist West", more recently scores of Slovak psychologists could, at the invitation and outlays of the organizers, attend these meetings organized there (Austria, West Germany); for several of them it was their first visit to the "West".

3. Thanks to the first MPDC organized in Slovakia, the quarterly *Studia Psychologica* was successfully transformed into an international journal with an international editorial board; at that time, it was the first "current informer" on research activities from countries of the so-called socialist commonwealth of nations.

4. In confrontation with the then theoretico-methodological conceptions between "Eastern" and "Western" psychologists, a specific scientific school of experimental psychology came gradually to be established at the MPDC - called by others the "Bratislava School", within whose framework scores of plausible (text-book) concepts, as well as research methodologies, came to be created.

5. In virtue of discussions and debates at the MPDC, several publications appeared, some of which elicited a considerable response, particularly see the References.

AND WHAT NEXT?

At the tenth MPDC that took place not only after a considerable time interval, but also under new socio-political conditions in 1993 again in Slovakia, accent was laid on new realities.

1. Through the fall of the Iron Curtain, the frontiers between the former "East" and "West" in Europe were given the "green light" also in the case of psychology and psychologists.

2. The new reality has to include the transformation of the scientific-research base in countries of the former socialistic commonwealth which has provoked no small survival problems, particularly to academic psychological places of work which had formerly been the principal organizers and material-financial providers of the MPDC.

3. On the other hand, it may be surmised that a manifest decline of interest in psychological events has also affected our "Western" colleagues: "they (i.e., "Eastern") no longer need our support; after all, they are "or wish to be" just like us.

4. Entering these processes in the transit countries, hence, in the majority of those participating in the MPDC, are organizer-supporting subjects from the "West", sponsors, funds, scholarships, etc., which, by favoring certain fashionable topics and giving priority to younger adepts, began to create new organizational structures. This gave rise to new grouping of psychologists, organized on different principles and criteria from those characteristic of the MPDC.

5. It thus happened that despite the efforts expended by the organizer, as also the attractive environment, (The High Tatras), the number of participants at the 10th MPDC was the smallest of all those held

till then; the core members of this informal grouping have remained (regrettably, some are among our departed friends); new ones - as earlier used to be the rule - have not caught on in terms of the "snowball" method.

Hence, WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

EPILOGUE

In 2001 (September 16-19), through the persistent initiative on the part of Prof. G.A. Lienert, A. Thomas from the University of Regensburg organized the 11th MPDC. Regrettably, its tireless inspirator did not live to see it through. The event with the central topic "Psychology in Eastern Europe - Changes and Perspectives" was attended by no more than 29 - for the most part active - participants from Slovenia, Croatia, Yugoslavia, Austria, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and the German Federal Republic. The orga-

nizers promised that all the proceedings would be published in "Psychologische Beiträge". In the congress hall and the corridors of the cozy pastoral center in the renovated manor "Spindelhof", animated discussions went on about the future of this informal grouping of Central-European psychologists, but for the time being...

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STRETNUTIA PSYCHOLÓGOV PODUNAJSKÝCH KRAJÍN: MALÝ KRÔČIK K PROCESU ZJEDNOCOVANIA EURÓPY

D. K o v á č

Súhrn: Základnými charakteristikami sa popisujú tradičné odborné podujatia - nie konferencie alebo semináre - ale Stretnutia psychológov podunajských krajín (1967-1993). Po prvých troch na Slovensku sa konali vo všetkých vtedajších krajinách, cez ktoré preteká európska veľrieka Dunaj (okrem Rumunska). Zúčastňovali sa ich poprední experti z výskumných ústavov (Akadémií) a univerzít, úhrnom vyše 500. V štúdiu sa popisuje strategický dosah Stretnutí a výberove aj niektoré ich výtobytky a výsledky.