In Memoriam László Bertalan

Peter Cserne, University of Hamburg
IN MEMORIAM LÁSZLÓ BERTALAN

Péter CSERNE

Ph.D. student, Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Faculty of Law
Budapest, Szentkirályi u. 28. H-1088; e-mail: peter.cserne@mailbox.hu

Life, works and influence of a great teacher. László Bertalan (1941–2001), late Associate Professor at the Department of Sociology of Budapest University of Economic Sciences and Public Administration studied Hungarian, ethnology and philosophy at Eötvös Loránd University (Budapest). He graduated in philosophy in 1965 and began his scientific career by the Sociological Research Group of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. In the 1970s he began to teach history and methodology of sociology at the Budapest University of Economic Sciences and joined the staff of the Department of Sociology in 1983.

Although Professor Bertalan published several articles already in his student years (mainly on aesthetics; see Bertalan 1964a, b, c, d1), later he concentrated his scholarly efforts on teaching and editorial work and wrote only some shorter pieces (Bertalan 1968, 1974a, 1974b, 1991 [1980]). His interest turned rather early toward the philosophical and methodological problems of social sciences in general and of sociology in particular. As György Bence noted, Bertalan’s interest in the 1960s for a then exceptional combination of Hegelian philosophy and Marxism à la Lukács with Hempel’s philosophy of science made his approach a predecessor of analytical Marxism.

His university lectures, e.g. on Weber’s and Simmel’s sociology, on contextual analysis or the theoretical background of public opinion research have attracted great attention. But they are conserved for later generations only in student notes. In the last months of his life, Professor Bertalan started to prepare some of them for publication – now they will be published posthumously.2

As for his editorial activity, Bertalan worked several decades as an editor of Szociológia, now Szociológiai Szemle (the Hungarian version of this journal). In 1977 he created a new section in the journal to publish translations of selected articles and excerpts from texts by social science classics on subjects ranging from factor analysis and causality to shirking and self-fulfilling prophecies. These works have been

1 A short ‘Note on the author’ accompanying 1964d states that he was then working on a study about Arnold Gehlen’s philosophical anthropology. As far as I know, this paper, if ever completed, has not been published.

2 His lectures on Weber’s theory of action have been published after his death. See Bertalan 2001.
essential resources of information for Hungarian sociologists interested in the covered topics. (Some of the texts were republished later in book form. See Bertalan 1987.) He also compiled several university textbooks (Bertalan 1989, 1993, 1997a, 1997b) and contributed in different ways to the Hungarian reception of Weber’s work.3

The modest size and fragmented character of his oeuvre, as in the case of his student, László Csontos (1953–1997) was not an accident (See Cserne 2001: 143). Writing articles was only the tip of the iceberg in their work: teaching as well as making classical texts accessible to the Hungarian audience was equally important for both. But the fact that the genre of Bertalan’s most important publications is logical analysis of and comments on classical sociological texts is also closely related to and, indeed best explained by his research and teaching method. This method, in turn reflects Bertalan’s unique approach to sociological problems.

His main interest was in analyzing and reconstructing the logic of argument of classics and contemporary authors in social sciences. Social sciences, as he conceived them, can contribute most fruitfully to the resolution of disputes on substantive problems by making clear the logical structure of the opposing arguments. After reducing this opposition to a conflict between different but more or less equally unclear and fuzzy interpretations of certain concepts (e.g. division of labor, capitalism, or social class), the main task of the social scientist is to offer a new explication of these concepts. This explication shall maintain similarity to the everyday use of the concept while being more precise, relatively simple and scientifically fruitful. In most of the cases explication consists in constructing a typology of the phenomena denoted by the concept.

What made Bertalan’s lectures exemplary and unforgettable for his students was their intellectual seriousness, which reflected a perfect methodological self-consciousness and an uncompromising, almost radical commitment to, and requirement of logical correctness both in the analysis of others’ arguments and in his own explications. All this was combined with an extraordinary memory and a good sense of humor, which, on rare occasions, broke through the veil of his reserved and modest personality.

It is not surprising so that for Bertalan neither the messianic spirit of critical sociology nor the immersion in empirical details of descriptive sociology were sympathetic. This doesn’t mean that he would not have had a certain political commitment, a well-founded opinion on daily public issues or an exceptional range of knowledge, among others in economic and social history.

Report on a conference. The purpose of the two-day conference, held in March 2002 at BUESPÁ was to commemorate the distinguished sociologist and philosopher, László Bertalan. Colleagues and disciples presented pieces of their research in seven sections. As for the variety of topics, the lectures covered historical, methodological and philosophical aspects of sociology as well as different problems in empirical sociological research – in each case with an intention to focus on questions, which also

---


Bertalan would have considered relevant and interesting. In what follows, I will resume the historical and methodological lectures in some detail and will be brief in reporting on the work of other sections.

After the introductory address of György Lengyel, Head of the Department of Sociology, the first contributor in the section on history of science was Ágnes Erdélyi. Based on some of Weber’s recently published manuscripts, she argued that Heinrich Rickert’s influence on Max Weber’s methodological stance was quite small and more indirect than the widespread views (represented in standard handbooks and consciously manipulated by Rickert himself) hold. György Bence brought some new light on a forgotten linkage in the history of political and social thought. He presented the transformation and re-interpretation of Hegel’s legal and political philosophy while transmitted by Lorenz von Stein to the Hungarian legal and political theorist, Gyöző Concha (1846–1933). The lecture of Anna Wessely focused on an even more distant age by presenting a portrait of Theodor Gottlieb von Hippel, politician and writer, Kant’s disciple and mayor of Königsberg who published three volumes on marriage and legal, political and social status of women in the 1780s. By referring to some newly published sources, historian Gyula Benda presented some Weberian elements in the methodological views of Elemér Mályusz (1898–1989), expert of medieval Hungarian history, who was much interested in the problems of ethnic consciousness and identity. Zoltán Szántó’s lecture witnessed for the most expressed inspiration of Bertalan’s approach. He resumed some theoretical models of the division of labor (Smith, Marx, Weber, Karl Bücher, Durkheim) by differentiating concepts, types (definition, classification), causes (possibility and necessity), consequences (functionality) and reasons (intentional or teleological explanation) of the division of labor.

The section on methodology also comprised five lectures. Imre Orthmayr presented some achievements and problems of evolutionary (Hayek) and rational choice (Lewis, Ullmann-Margalit) explanations of social norms and analyzed new directions of research (Christina Bicchieri, Brian Skyrms), which intend to explain norms by combining the advantages of these rival explanatory methods. The lecture of Ferenc Huoranszki on the concept of causality, following traditions of analytical philosophy, argued that there is no unproblematic theoretical explication of causality (all the four concept candidates leave some cases unresolved). So if we do not want to eliminate causality from the language of social science, we have to work with a plural theory of causality. István Szakadáti departed from Bertalan’s lectures on relational logic. He presented how these logical concepts can contribute to research on hierarchical organizations and in information theory. László Szakadáti focused on methodological problems of microeconomics. He argued for an approach focusing on the rational individual who makes his utility-maximizing choices in a world characterized by scarcity; within some social constraints; and embedded in social situations, i.e. playing a role in different allocating mechanisms among which the most important is competition. Referring to Bertalan’s work on statistical theory, Tamás Bartus convincingly explained some methodological problems raised by the use of chance ratio in regression models with categorical dependent variables.
Lectures on theoretical sociology included papers by Róbert Angelusz and Róbert Tardos (on macrosociological applications of Peter Blau’s concepts of consolidation and intersection), Károly Varga (on the sociology of values), Dezső Helmich (on the problematics of Wertfreiheit), László Zsolnai (on the plural conception of rationality) and László Z. Antal (on the sociological interpretation of the sacred).

Four sections treated different problems of empirical sociology. The first, dedicated to welfare systems gave place to lectures on income distribution in Hungary in the 1990s (István György Tóth), inter-generational redistribution (Róbert Iván Gál and Géza Tarcali), moral considerations in citizens’ preferences for welfare institutions (Béla Janky) and on private wealth transfers among generations (Márton Medgyesi).

Another section was dealing with the changes in the social structure in Hungary. Ildikó Hrubos lectured on recent results of sociological research on higher education. János Ladányi analyzed the changes in the spatial structure of the Jewish population in Budapest between 1870 and 2000, Ferenc Gereben spoke on social determinants of literary tastes, János Balázs on the role of norms and individualism in the space of values, and Judit Durst on the changes in fertility and family size in the Hungarian rural Gypsy population.

The lectures on economic sociology began with the paper by György Lengyel and Rita Hegedűs on the relation between subjective and objective measures of social welfare. Gábor Kertesi and János Köllő used econometric models in the analysis of employment effects of recent Hungarian minimum wage legislation. Beáta Nagy focused on the interrelatedness of changes in the gender ratio among top managers, in everyday stereotypes about female managers and in the theoretical reflection on women’s managerial style. Lajos Bódis used transaction cost economics to model wage bargaining and its effects on firm productivity. István János Tóth reported on the differences between the quality of election predictions of four Hungarian public opinion institutes.

The section on special sociological problems included the lectures of Imre Fertő (on the limited explanatory force of agrarian economics, regarding the dominance of family firms in developed countries), László Letenyei (on the limits of cultural anthropology in interpreting esoteric symbols in native cultures), Katalin Formádi (on the division of labor in tourism as an economic branch), Gábor Balogh (on the difficulties of constructing types and typologies in sociology) and László Ásványi (on the inverse relation of instrumental and value-rationality to market-like and cultural institutions in Hungary and the United States).

Professor Bertalan’s demise has been a great loss equally for his family, friends, colleagues and students. In contrast to the undue insufficiency of official recognition rewarded him in his life, the exceptional influence of his person and work on sociology in Hungary was reflected in the great number and wide disciplinary spectrum of participants who contributed at the conference dedicated to his memory. The conference lectures will be published in the near future.
REFERENCES


Bertalan, László–Andorka, Rudolf eds. (1986): *Economy and Society in Hungary*, Budapest: Karl Marx University of Economic Sciences Department of Sociology [Hungarian Sociological Studies 3].


