

Preface

This themed issue of *Střed/Centre* “Minority science’ in the Short 20th Century”, consisting of articles by Patrick Flack, Lara Bonneau and Florian Ruttner, is one of the results of a conference of the same name that took place in Prague in the spring of 2023.¹ It brought together scholars whose stated aim was to discuss how science can be understood if viewed not from the perspective of central figures, but from that of academic minorities and outsiders. It continued an endeavor that began in the historiography of science in the 1970s, but that has been very slow to take root: to write the history of science not as the history of those at the top of academic hierarchies – mostly white men – but as a history that includes the diversity of voices that academia seeks to unite through its universalist rhetoric (much more rarely through its practice). Our explicit goal, however, was not to write yet another additive history,² adding the description of yet another group to the unchanging “core” narrative of academia. Instead, we wanted to challenge the received narrative of the academy by presenting it as an institution that is far more fluid and diverse than the narratives we have been accustomed to reading. However, this approach should not ignore the power relations that have shaped both the academy, its public presence, and the narratives about it, but rather critically analyze them and include them in the analytical framework.

The concept of minority is a perfect means of describing such an endeavor – not because it has a fixed meaning, but because it does not. Its aim was to

- 1 “Minority science” in the Short 20th Century: Imagining Science from the Margins of Academia, 30 March – 1 April 2023, organized by Jan Surman and Galina Babak at the Masaryk Institute and Archives of the Czech Academy of Sciences. The conference and this issue of *Střed/Centre* were supported by the Lumina Quaeruntur fellowship of the Czech Academy of Sciences (Grant ID LQ300772201) titled “Images of Science” in Czechoslovakia 1918–1945–1968. Further articles from the conference will appear in *Neprikosnovennyj zapas* 2/2024 and *Studia Historiae Scientiarum* vols. 23 (2024) and 24 (2025). An earlier version of this text appeared in *Neprikosnovennyj zapas* 2/2024, pp. 135–137.
- 2 On the idea see, e.g., the discussion DIETLIND HÜCHTKER et al., Stereotypes, Imageries and Hegemonies: Race, Gender and History of Science in East Central Europe, in: *Science Interconnected. German-Polish Scholarly Entanglements in Modern History*, ed. J. Surman, Marburg 2022, pp. 327–39; ALEKSANDRA DERRA, ANNA M. KOLA, WOJCIECH PIASEK (eds.), *Niewidzia(l)ne. Kobiety i Historia Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika w Toruniu*, Toruń 2020.

provoke reflection on whom, at a given time and place, could be called a “minority” and who, in fact, would be the “majority.” And, last but not least, what the criteria for such a distinction would be. It is also clear that considering “minority science” involves not only examining the scientific contributions of underrepresented groups, but also investigating and questioning boundaries between what is considered mainstream and marginalized in the scientific community.

Clearly, legal and social perceptions of “minority” and “majority” cannot be the sole indicator of such positions, and the self-identification of scholars must be taken into account. Of course, this works to a certain extent, as we can now see through the ideas that the “cancel culture” will eradicate white males from academia; while it could be productive to analyze such narratives and self-perceptions,³ such analysis might be better placed in the section on conspiracy theories than within historiography of science. Our approach revealed the multiple meanings of minority – from national-ethnic-cultural-social, through gender and sexual orientation, to disciplinary. Often such exclusions and inclusions occurred simultaneously. In the late 2010s, for instance, science historians vividly debated the excellent talk by Harvard historian of science and medicine Evelyn Hammonds, who, at the 2016 History of Science Society meeting in Atlanta, discussed how the entry of women of color into academia had long been blocked not only by racial segregation and male dominance, but also because affirmative action initiatives targeted either men of color or white women.⁴

While different groups have experienced exclusion and/or oppression at different times, two things should be kept in mind. First, former subalterns can – and sometimes do – come to power and exercise exclusion as well. One example is the Polish scholars in Habsburg Galicia, who were once oppressed by German-speaking scholars, but then, while in a position of power, excluded Ruthenians/Ukrainians.⁵ The trajectories of disciplines rightly follow the same path – former outsiders, solidifying the boundaries of new disciplines, create

- 3 For a recent, journalistic analysis see ELIE MYSTAL, How Cancel Culture Became Conservative Academia’s Favorite Grift, *Balls and Strikes*, 8 June 2022, <https://ballsandstrikes.org/legal-culture/georgetown-ilya-shapiro-cancel-culture-favorite-grift/> [9.12.2024].
- 4 The talk was not printed in its entirety, yet much of what Hammonds discussed can be found in EVELYNN MAXINE HAMMONDS, VALERIE TAYLOR, REBEKAH HUTTON (eds.), *Transforming Trajectories for Women of Color in Tech*, Washington, DC 2022.
- 5 JAN SURMAN, *Universities in Imperial Austria, 1848–1918. A Social History of a Multilingual Space*, West Lafayette 2019, Chapters 5 (on the imperial situation) and 7 (on the postimperial situation). Accessible at <https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/24991>.

new outsiders who have to defend their positions – and once they do (if, of course, they do) and rise to positions of power, the story repeats itself. This also pertains to the academic hierarchies: scholars who, as students, were exploited by their seniors are happy to exploit their juniors once they become seniors themselves.⁶

Yet, and this was the last point we wanted to accentuate with our conference, “minority” and “majority” do not occupy completely different planes, but often share the same epistemic space. The search for such commonalities in communities of conflicts and tensions is in fact the guiding topic of the project the conference originated from.⁷ Such commonalities are of course also a matter of perspective and scale: For historians of the science of the Global South, Russian or Soviet science will be parts of the “Western” episteme, while the perceptions of these countries might differ and at times did so considerably.

The conference and this issue also aim to encourage reflection on how outsiders perceive science and universities more broadly, recognizing the diverse perspectives that shape these perceptions, especially those of individuals in different geographical, cultural, and transcultural settings, such as the exiled linguist Roman Jakobson or the interwar literary historian Dmytro Chyzhevsky. Finally, this approach offers a perspective on the evolution of minority and majority understandings of science over the past centuries, with an emphasis on the narratives and histories of the actors who contribute to it. In other words, science is not just about ideas; it is also about the people who actively participate in its pursuit.

Jan Surman – Galina Babak

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6 For examples, see e.g. ASLI VATANSEVER, AYSUDA KÖLEMEN (eds.), *Academic Freedom and Precarity in the Global North. Free as a Bird*, Abingdon 2023; ERIN PRITCHARD, DELYTH EDWARDS (eds.), *Sexual Misconduct in Academia. Informing an Ethics of Care in the University*, Abingdon – New York 2023.

7 Lumina Quareruntur fellowship of the Czech Academy of Sciences, “Images of Science’ in Czechoslovakia 1918–1945–1968,” <https://imagesofscience.wordpress.com/>.