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UNRAVELLED CHAPTERS OF OUR COMMON PAST

The *European Journal of Mental Health* launches a series of articles entitled ‘Unravelling Chapters of Our Common Past’. The aim of this new series is to encourage experts who lived in former dictatorships to forward papers to other European regions in order to describe and demonstrate details from the history of the helping professions characterised as ‘ideology-laden’ in the past. The papers submitted can discuss episodes and detail questions but should primarily offer an overview.

We invite our authors to describe the history of their own discipline – psychotherapy, church-based social (charitable) work, educational activity – in the era of the past dictatorship, while providing an insight into structural issues of the years of suppression which depict the relation of their profession to respective governmental systems.

Each topic will be presented from the viewpoint of at least two post-socialist countries, in order to emphasise common historical patterns. In addition to the situation of human helping, the papers may describe opportunities – remarkable past events, challenges and problem-solving initiatives – that are informative and progressive, and may strengthen the forging of our relationship based on the impact of our common past.

Under dictatorships in the twentieth century – mostly during the long-lasting socialist ones – the development of human professions was blocked or considerably retarded. The fall of these regimes has confronted the experts with the fact that if they want to keep abreast of parts of the world that developed in societies which enjoyed greater freedoms, and if they want to use their scientific results, they will have to rely

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on traditions of their own. In our everyday work, we can see that the results of human scholarship or culture cannot be exported or imported in the same manner as material goods, given the fact that the latter are more strongly connected to human values, norms and morals than agricultural or industrial products. Their existence is conditional upon a more comprehensive background and longer periods of socialisation. Thus, after the cessation of dictatorships – which most people believed to be an overall change of the political regimes – work in the field of the human professions could not be started in the same manner as with reconstructing and refurnishing an obsolete or ruined factory.

Ambitious decisions have often failed because professionals and specialists were not well enough acquainted with either the human element or the processes that existed during the time of the dictatorship. The work can be continued only when the history of one's own professional field, its relationship with the neighbouring disciplines, and the losses suffered in the past is known. These losses may include the cessation of certain fields or the oblivion of earlier results. Last, but not least, one has to be open to values that could be saved through the years of dictatorship, and even to those which could be born – even in the most difficult years. A little provocatively we may even say: we also have to examine what we have gained from dictatorship.

Our past can become a building element of the present processes only when we make ourselves conscious of which values were damaged in our society and the availability of both former resources and new ones which we can now use. The knowledge of the common points in our history may strengthen our identity, may make us aware of our own level of development, and – through the common experience of the professionals in the post-socialist countries – may support the knowledge of belonging together, which, in turn, may facilitate our future cooperation. In this process, Europe's task is not only to gradually eliminate the negative aspects and deficiencies of the human helping professions in the post-socialist countries, but also to involve existing fresh resources in this common work.

Thus, the task ahead for fellow Europeans seems to be not to concentrate on the alien aspects of the ex-socialist countries and the task nature of their problems, but rather to see the possibilities that partners can realise and to make full use of the new and extraordinary opportunities which lie before them on their common path.

The history of science and social history have so far said little about what situation human scholarship was in during the years of socialism. One thing seems to be sure: different traditions and the various ways political and ideological intervention played out, in addition to the liberalisation processes that took place prior to or following certain political crisis processes all influenced development in different ways in each country. Nevertheless, collecting special data from the individual countries may help describe general criteria.

The more studies we are able to publish, the more differentiated picture we will have on such areas of science as psychotherapy, charitable work and pedagogy, and with their aid a more consistent picture to assess the effects of dictatorship.

What we expect from our authors is to depict the history of their discipline in a manner which, according to the general aspects of description, presents facts which

may serve a more articulated understanding of the present situation, and may help us to learn our lessons and to develop a plan for the future.

In particular, the following topics should be emphasised in the papers:

- what were the specific, unique historical processes in the given country when the dictatorship started;
- what phases can be identified in the period of the dictatorship from the viewpoint of the given helping profession;
- at what level of development the given helping profession was at the start of the dictatorship;
- what impacts reached the discipline in the different phases of the dictatorship;
- what values developed or strengthened, and what values were damaged during the dictatorship;
- what roads became visible by the time of the change of the political regime.

The aim of the above list is to give a possible identical structure to the description of the available knowledge, which, in turn, allows for its comparison with processes in other countries and with respective situations of disciplines in different countries.

As studies in our series are written in either German or English, this introductory study to the series is published in both languages.