

REVIEW

THE PROFILE OF EUROPEAN SOCIOLOGISTS. REPORT ON THE 12TH CONFERENCE OF THE EUROPEAN SOCIOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION (25 – 28 AUGUST 2015, PRAGUE)

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The title of the conference that was organized in the modern building complex of the Czech Technical University suggested that, besides addressing the usual, practically ‘mandatory’ subjects, the conference would this time include the unusual and fresh topics Differences, Inequalities and Sociological Imagination. Several factors contributed to creating the optimistic, dynamic atmosphere necessary for this. First of all, the conference was attended by the greatest number of participants ever recorded: 3,500 registrants (at the previous conference in Turin there were 2,600 participants), and the number of papers and posters that were presented also set a new record (2,900), along with the number of sessions (700). The obvious presence of a significant number of young participants was conspicuous to anyone who walked through the corridors of the university or in the university parks. According to the official report of the Program Committee, 28% of the participants were students (and according to one non-official estimate, 40%, if PhD students are also included). So, the fruits of the sociology PhD programs have ripened. Many doctoral candidates wish to test themselves in a professional European working environment, and the PhD graduation process also compels them to engage in as much intense publication activity as possible. Perhaps we don’t need to worry so much about the future of sociology science after all.

Fortunately, the ‘great elders’ were not absent either. Zygmund Bauman gave a lecture at the opening event entitled *Out of Control and Running Wild*; or a (Recent) *History of Modern Inequality*. His lecture concerned the topic of the new managerial strategy, and management through uncertainty (birth, condition, and prospects). Ágnes Heller presented at a mid-day session. In her

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lecture (The Stranger and the National States of Europe) she raised a question, the answer to which will fundamentally determine the future of the continent: whether the European Union can become the institution that can re-engage Europe with its own heritage (its pre-WW I position of self-awareness), or whether Europe will enter a period of super nationalism which will not easily conform to ideas about liberal democracy.

The different fields of Sociology were represented in 37 Research Network Sessions and 7 Research Stream Sessions which accommodated a variety of more specific subjects. Concerning the sociology of education, the eternal topics of social selection and inequalities dominated the field, with an even more intensive focus than previously on ethnicity, migration and minorities, linked to the increasingly perceptible impact of market forces on the educational system. In the case of my own topic (research into higher education), I was glad to notice that the most spectacular phenomenon that has happened over the past 1-2 years—the emergence of Massive Open Online Courses—has ignited the interest of sociologists as well. Is it possible that this system, which follows a fundamentally new philosophy and applies a new set of techniques, will contribute to reducing various forms of social inequality?

At this conference a special role was played by the Council of National Associations (CNA, chairperson Professor Roberto Cipriani). This body is comprised of representatives of national sociological associations and is tasked with providing a forum for the consideration and discussion of the profession in its entirety, while professional work is carried out through Research Networks and Research Streams. It is responsible for appointing candidates through the ESA elections (the President, and Executive Committee members), which occur biannually. Furthermore, it enters into discussion about topics that are the subjects of communication between the ESA and the European Commission, as well as the European Research Council.

In recent years it has been engaged in an explicitly pioneering task. In 2012-2013, survey research took place during which 40 national sociological associations were contacted and information collected from them regarding their own associations, the teaching of sociology in higher education and the career opportunities for graduates with sociology degrees. The first report about the results of this research was presented at a mid-day session (Maria Carmela Agodi, Ellen Annandale, Luis Baptista, Roberto Cipriani: National Sociological Association in Europe: A survey). The related paper places the topic of interest, the phenomenon itself, into an elegant theoretical-historical framework: national sociological associations were established in various historical periods, they have gained diverse experience that exerts an influence on their own mission formulation and their current practices, which is also

manifested in the composition of their membership. The authors attempted to determine primary career types and were able to distinguish between four: academics (characteristically university professors), researchers (in a rather broad sense), and public and private practitioners of the profession of sociology. In the course of the more detailed analysis they identified 50 different job types. They concluded that sociologists are present in a multitude of sectors of society in every country that was surveyed. The authors conducted an interesting experiment: they tried to estimate the number of sociologists in Europe. By using various demographic data, they established the fact that there are approximately 300,000 active sociologists in Europe, which is a considerable mass of well-trained individuals who are capable of influencing the fate of societies.

The survey staff recounted some of their unfavorable experiences in connection with the data collection process: many didn't fill out the questionnaires correctly, and there were a number of incomplete responses. This wasn't primarily the result of negligence but was rather due to the fact that, in many cases, national sociological associations don't actually have adequate data related to the most basic professional issues. Therefore, the results and the conclusions of the survey are rather tenuous. The authors recommended that the ESA should initiate regular, coordinated processes of data collection about its member organizations. After this honest presentation about the everyday difficulties of research, broad conclusions were offered at the end of the paper regarding the future of European sociology. According to the authors, the geographical scope of international scientific and science-policy cooperation should be expanded. Besides the usual European and North American perspective, we should open towards Asia, Africa, South and Central America.

From here it was just another short stop to an extraordinary CAN-organized mid-day session, entitled *The meeting of civilizations: towards a European-Arab sociology*. The Arab Association of Sociology had previously contacted ESA with the idea of fostering cooperation between the two sociological associations. Their representative, Professor Tahab Labib (a Tunisian sociologist), in his lecture suggested that the idea was self-explanatory, not only because of geographical proximity, but also because the Arab presence in Europe and the influence of Arabic culture on Europe throughout history are evident. This meeting and the debate that was conducted in front of the professional audience was preparation for a forthcoming program. Between October 19th and 25th the First Euro-Arab Meeting for Young Researchers in Social Sciences will be organized in coordination with the International Sociological Association, ESA and the Arab Association of Sociology in

Manama, Bahrain. Twenty young Arab and European researchers will be invited to this event and offered professional assistance with and feedback on their ongoing PhDs or Masters' theses.

The session of the General Assembly took place during the conference. A mandatory part of the president's report is an analysis about the number of members. The number of members for 2015 is 2,118 (in 2013 it was 1,965). The countries with the highest levels of membership (in decreasing order, with the greatest first) are the following: the UK, Germany, Italy, Poland, and Russia. Among the reports related to the different areas of activity, the material from the Publications and Communications Committee is always of great interest. This body reported on a significant achievement. They have commenced publishing ESA's second periodical, the *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology (ECPS)*, which follows *European Societies (ES)*. Four editions of the ESA newsletter, *European Sociologist*, have been published over the past two years. The ESA also has a book series *Studies in European Societies* that is published by Routledge. It dates back to 1999 and has published over 20 books.

The work of the PhD Committee has had genuine successes. Between July 27th and 29th 2015, the body organized a PhD Summer School program with the participation of the University of York (UK), entitled *A sociological imagination for the 21st century*. The task was to prepare an article, for which the opportunity to go through an intense consultation process and a series of debates provided great assistance. 23 participants were selected from 45 applicants. The other work of the PhD Committee included organizing the pre-conference PhD Workshop in Prague (August 23-24). For this event, emphasis was also placed on completion of a publication. Students were required to provide a written draft of an article, to be circulated in advance. The Workshop consisted of in-depth discussions of the articles. There were 103 applicants, of whom 20 participants were selected based on strict criteria and preliminary submissions. ESA provided considerable financial support to the students who were selected to participate, for both events. For the most ambitious young researcher candidates, this represented an excellent opportunity to gain skill and experience performing in an international environment through the course of work conducted in an intense, collegial manner.

The General Assembly elected a new President, Professor Frank Welz (Innsbruck University, Austria) and new members of the Executive Committee. The outgoing President is Carmen Leccardi.

The next conference will be held in Athens from 22 to 25 of August, 2017.