

REVIEW

THE STRUGGLE FOR A BETTER SOCIOLOGY (ABOUT THE 3RD FORUM OF ISA (10-14TH JULY 2016, VIENNA, AUSTRIA))

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For the third time in its history, ISA, the International Sociological Association, organised a Forum; this time from 10-14 July, 2016 in Vienna, Austria. The ISA forums aim to integrate the traditionally organised Research Council Conference and the interim conferences of the different Research Committees and Thematic and Working Groups. The forums take place every second year and provide the opportunity for sociologists from around the world to gather and engage in dialogue about the most pressing issues on a thematic basis.

This time, nearly five thousand sociologists from 126 countries came to Vienna to address the topic *The Futures We Want: Global Sociology and the Struggles for a Better World*. The ISA Forum hosted almost seven hundred sessions, including five plenary sessions and the round-table sessions of fifty-five different Research Committees. Moreover, several sessions were also organised by the four Working Groups and the four Thematic Groups in order to make space for debates and dialogues between experts of different but related sociological fields. As emphasized in its motto, the ISA Forum's focus this year was on the global social challenges of our times, with a particular focus on the question of what role sociologists can and should play in tackling societal problems at the global, regional, national and local community level. This Forum's theme was in line with the organisation's commitment to the "public sociology" approach promoted by Burawoy, the former president of the ISA, who emphasized the need for practical contributions by sociologists to the well-being of societies. *Margaret Abraham*, the current president of the ISA, recalled the genesis of the ISA in her opening speech and reminded participants that the association was founded with the purpose of promoting democracy and just societies through the tools of empirical and theoretical sociological knowledge. The most relevant,

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crucial “struggles” that were in the organisers’ minds when framing the topic of the Forum were global phenomena related to the issues of migration and refugees, globally intensifying nationalism and the rise of right-wing groups, xenophobia, racism, islamophobia, the ongoing wars and violence in different parts of the world, terrorism, climate change, the economic and political crisis (particularly of the EU, but including other places), and the different consequences of the economic crisis, such as an increase in unemployment and inequality. Apart from the growing challenges that our societies face at all levels, what inspired the Forum’s approach is the collective action that is manifested in forms of global and local protests and other movements of different formats; all designed to create alternative solutions, and possibly “better futures”. The forum devoted several sessions to examining these kinds of activities so that sociologists could better identify how they could contribute to the analysis of the struggles that oppose phenomena such as hatred, violence, xenophobia and terrorism. As expressed by the ISA president, sociologists should not stop at describing and understanding the difficulties and circumstances of our lives, but must engage with the public in all matters that affect societies. Sociology not only needs to be an important stakeholder of public policies, but, driven by its moral and social responsibility, should offer help to civil society in the form of alternatives, solutions and changes. Abraham stressed that networks such as the ISA need to make themselves and their comprehensive knowledge more open and accessible, to communicate better to other disciplines, and foster cooperation and collaboration between different public actors.

If we think of the founding fathers of sociology such as Comte, or some of the contemporary scholars such as Beck, it is easy to identify that sociologists traditionally have an interest in the future, although as *Markus S. Schulz* underlined in his speech, courses on the future seem to be disappearing from most sociological curricula. He warned participants that the plural form of “future” that appears in the conference title was used to provoke and remind us that the futures that the individuals and groups of people want and shape must be analysed in a contextualised way, and that cultural diversity should be appreciated and given priority during this process of analysis.

ISA Research Groups engage with a very wide spectrum of sociological questions and include presentations that cover topics from micro situations to macro dynamics. Due to the huge number of participants and parallel events it was impossible to take part in all sessions of interest, although the small-scale roundtable sessions within each Research Committee were found to be ideal for sharing insights and experiences with participants engaged in similar issues. Based on the papers presented in sections of the Research Committees’ *Social Classes and Social Movements* (RC47) and *Social Movements, Collective Actions*

and Social Change (RC48) it seemed that the majority of social movements and collective action is currently targeting the topics of environmental issues, the anti-austerity measures of governments, and gender-related claims such as those of the feminist and LGBTQ movements. There is certainly some interconnection between locally-based action and the global themes of movements. Social media and the appearance of the newest technologies are inspiring many researchers to dig into questions such as how Facebook and Twitter are rewriting the patterns, forms and character of collective action. From most of the findings presented in the sections it seemed that physical and digital activism should not be treated separately; on the contrary, these movements are engaged in a process of on-going interaction. Another important conclusion we could draw based on the discussions is that our knowledge and theoretical frameworks for social movements need to be rethought and redefined according to the recent manifestations. Classical perspectives are challenged by today's movements and require an approach that puts more emphasis on cultural elements such as identity, meanings, symbols, emotions and the personal dimensions of social transformations. We should also consider where the border lines are located between what we consider social movements in the traditional sense and other day-to-day activities.

The so-called "Business Meetings" of the Research Committees at the third ISA Forum were organised to foster networking between participants of similar areas of expertise and to give them more insight into the work of the 'Committees' that occurs in the period between the forums and congresses. Building and strengthening networks are tools ISA is using to promote a "global sociology" that is based on the connections between sociologists around the globe. Another such tool is the Global Mapping of Sociologists for Social Inclusion (GMSSI), an ongoing project of the association which is designed to create the first comprehensive database to include sociologists from across the world, and to strengthen potential collaboration between them.

Special attention was paid during the Forum's plenary sessions to those sociologists who encounter different barriers of an economic or political nature which impede their participation and even their regular professional activities. Though the sociologists of the Global North were still overrepresented both as participants and keynote speakers, many sessions were devoted to the issues which are particularly relevant to the Global South, and a comparative approach that promotes constant dialogue between the sociologists from the different parts of the world appeared both in the structure and the content of the Forum.

The capacity of sociology to identify solutions to the most crucial global issues was questioned and debated from different perspectives and within the frames of different research areas during the Forum. The vivid, diverse and inspirational atmosphere of the event, however, comforted participants with

the positive message that sociology has the legitimacy to seek out and identify relevant solutions. And, along with preserving the discipline's theoretical and methodological rigour and commitment to engaging with the public, there is hope that sociologists will be able to contribute to building a better world.

The thoughts of keynote speakers quoted in the paper are based on notes taken during the sessions.