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## The European Sociology We Want

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It is my pleasure to reply to the open letter by the Brno PhD candidates about the *aims vs practice* of ESA conferences, since they ask an important question: Do sociologists 30+ automatically forget about their early dreams and do 'business as usual'?

My reflection is mainly motivated by the team's statement about the 'discrepancy between the main topic and the actual event'. The criticism reminds me of the closing plenary of the Prague ESA conference: At the end of the day (and the meeting) a young scholar expressed his disappointment. He said (in my words), 'Yes, the invited speeches were interesting, there were interesting papers, you offered a pool of three thousand presentations, but ... did you really *explain* the question raised by your conference topic on one of the core problems of contemporary European society, which is increasing inequality?' If I had been asked, my answer and, I suppose, the answer of the majority of all listeners would clearly have been 'No!'. Why are we doing all this if we do not find the answers to the questions we ask? Do we in fact organise a kind of 'conference tourism' instead of enriching scholarly debates? Should we therefore apply 'Less is more!', as demanded by one of the feedback statements the conference received? Are there 'Too many sessions, too many poor papers', and should we introduce 'More gatekeeping for the admission of papers'? I am sure the intellectual value would be higher if we asked about ten renowned speakers to address the core conference question and if we made all 3500 other participants listen to them. Hundreds of conferences and workshops are operated this way all over Europe every year. It is a widely applied and good practice to organise conferences *top-down* and produce books out of them, but this cannot be the general idea of ESA conferences. In my view, ESA meetings have to fulfil a different function. Meetings of the National Associations including the European Sociological Association are the only *bottom-up* spaces. 'Everyone' should be welcome—if the quality of his/her work is sufficient. It is the ESA's job to organise an open space to which *all* sociologists from Europe are invited and where they can present their actual research and receive feedback (on the condition that a certain level of quality is guaranteed).

However, to my surprise the Brno team does not read the conference topic as a question and does not compare it to the answers offered in lectures and pres-

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entations. The Brno scholars do not target the scientific practice and output of the meeting. They are not putting their emphasis on the intellectual content of the meeting; instead, they focus on the possibly exclusive access to it, particularly to the conference party, they criticise the lack of public impact, and they demand social responsibility when it comes to appointing catering services and professional conference organisers. In my opinion, most of these tasks belong in the hands of the local organisers. Only local people are able to select the 'appropriate' place for the conference party. Beyond the 'ivory tower', only local sociologists would be able to know for whom, when, on what, and in which language a public sociology event for non-conference participants would be relevant. I am sure that our Prague colleagues did consider this, and I am further convinced that all Czech ESA sociologists will have done their best to promote and advertise the meeting among more people in their country than just university sociologists. The same reasoning applies to the selection of appropriate professional services. There are good reasons for passing the ball to the local organisers. Not everything should be decided from the remote viewpoint of the ESA headquarters.

But I will not withdraw from discussing the wider problems that go hand in hand with the questions asked by the Brno team. I will merely raise them in a slightly different way: (a) Is ESA an exclusive club? (b) In which sense can we treat and operate ESA sociology as a 'public matter'? And, finally, (c) what might enabling the 'socially responsible' production of knowledge actually mean?

#### **(a) Exclusivity? The ESA world is flat**

For discussing the 'social' question of a conference it is important to consider the restricting conditions. For a meeting of more than three thousand participants there is a hard-core limit to everything: The event must not go into debt. The reason is very simple. Neither a handful of motivated individuals nor a local university department nor the ESA could afford a budget minus of, for example, 100 000 euros, a sum that can easily be reached. Therefore the planning requires a safety line. For example, if you expect 3000 people to come, plan your expenses for 2500 participants (500 people are roughly equal to 100 000 euros). It is often claimed that conference fees should be lower (although social science fees are much lower than the fees charged by other disciplines). We receive many e-mails from colleagues who propose that for very good reasons this or that specific group should be granted lower fees—for example, unemployed colleagues, young PostDoc scholars, or participants from countries struck by the economic crisis. All such claims are legitimate, but unfortunately they cannot be the concern of conference planners. Planners cannot think about what would be the 'fair' price for one group or another. For planners the financing of a meeting is a zero sum game. Planners know very well that their budget be within, for example, 500 000 euros. If you reduce the fee for one group, you must necessarily increase the fee for another group. If PostDocs pay less, who is supposed to pay more?

What about participants from so-called B-countries and the unemployed from A-countries? Because of this, in my opinion, it is even wise to separate the conference party from the conference fees, as done by the Prague organisers, so as not to increase the average fee for everyone. The main entrance door should be kept as open as possible. This is not to say that the party must be an expensive event. I think the targeted 'level' of this event should be decided by the local organisers, which is what indeed happened in 2015 when the local committee (which included colleagues from Brno) selected the location of the conference party.

On the one hand, I am not denying that all this is difficult and that the fee structure of a conference requires careful consideration. Critiques like this one from the Brno group are most welcome because they motivate considering the question of exclusivity. On the other hand, having said this, I propose reflecting on the 'inequalities' in sociology in a much wider sense, too. And in this regard, I think, unlike sociology in Europe, 'ESA sociology' scores pretty well. *The ESA world is flat.*

Only a small (but growing) portion of sociology is organised by the ESA. Sociology as we know it is made by influential publishing houses (whose books we buy), prestigious private universities (whose scholars we invite), and admired SSCI journals (for which we polish our reference lists with further SSCI journal quotations). In addition, in some European countries universities, scientific associations, and their conferences still exhibit a feudal structure [Hofmeister 2013]. With slight exaggeration: the club of gatekeepers speaks and the rest are invited to listen. This is not the case with ESA meetings. There are two main reasons. First, jobs are still offered and organised in national sociologies. Neither ESA meetings nor ESA social networks matter. Second, the ESA strictly applies the rule that all decision-making ESA positions (such as Research Network coordinator or Executive Committee membership) must be elected and are given to the elected candidates for a limited period of time only. While in national sociologies belonging still matters for the chances of young scholars, at the ESA level the cards are reshuffled. In my opinion, the doors for participation at ESA conferences and in ESA Research Networks are kept wide open, and there are very good chances that quality matters instead of your inherited social capital.

## **(b) Beyond the ivory tower: in support of sociology as a public good**

Unlike the Brno PhD scholars, I am not sure whether in order to exit the ivory tower the task list of an ESA conference should include 'teaching' sociology to the inhabitants of the city where the conference is held. First, the main purpose of the conference is scientific exchange among those who register and pay for it. We should even put more emphasis on this and offer much stronger feedback and criticism to the papers we present. Initiate debates, make the scientific part more interesting! A debating culture should be installed. Second, the wider public should be addressed in the local language. 'Public sociology' would insofar be

more appropriate for a meeting of the Czech Sociological Association than for the ESA event. Third, only the local organisers and not so much their ESA colleagues would be able to outline and design a special event like the one proposed by the open letter from Brno.

Nevertheless, the proposal reminds me of a conference I recently attended in India and of another one I will soon attend in Germany. Both national sociological communities follow the strategy of inviting well-known public figures from politics (or the Federal Constitutional Court) to deliver an opening keynote address. Instead of keeping the sociological discourse in our self-referential world, it will be important to think about the symbolic battlefield of society 'out there' where sociology strives to matter, that is, considering and doing 'theory' in the relational world of practice if we indeed consider sociology a 'public good' that is available to and useful for all.

In favour of the latter, on the one hand, the sociology we want should of course be non-exclusive, it should be open to everybody. On the other hand, it has to be relevant and supportive for everybody, against inequalities, against exclusion, a kind of knowledge and thinking that matters, that helps to understand the world and improve life. However, my position is: first comes sociology, then comes the public. Only high-quality sociology will be able to serve as a public good. I suppose most of us want a version of sociology that is perhaps outlined in the ivory tower but nevertheless anchored in society, and, not least, that is worth working for.

Sociologists, of course, know that it is easier to demand social research have a 'public impact' than it is to implement this in practice. Following Bourdieu's [1992: 39] emphasis on the *logic of practice*, the social world is not a *spectacle* that just needs an appropriate interpretation. Neither our community of about 300 000 educated sociologists in Europe, nor the bulk of sociological publications, nor of course the ESA conferences are the centre of the world. We should not overestimate the significance of our undertaking with too big expectations. Regarding a more concrete example, getting journalists to report on our sociology event is much more difficult than the Brno authors seem to assume. I was not involved in the ESA's 2015 press activities; in 2013, however, a team went to great efforts to get journalists we were familiar with from all over Europe to the ESA's Turin conference on 'Crisis, Critique and Change', and had the very limited success of seeing just one national press article come out in Italy.

### **(c) (Un)Making European Sociology**

While I share the view of the Brno PhD scholars that sociology should be 'socially responsible', unlike them I will not apply this yardstick to our conference business operations but to the ESA's core dimension, the production of knowledge. Does our discipline offer socially responsible insights? What kind of knowledge

do we produce (and under what circumstances)? Carrying Marx, Foucault and Bourdieu on our shoulders, we cannot just outline old and new promising ideas about the role of sociology in society. Unlike historians of ideas, the first step for sociologists has to be not so much towards the content of knowledge but towards an analysis of the 'external conditions' that enable our knowledge production and determine its limits [Foucault 1971: 22]. My closing remarks will focus on two of these conditions.

My first point is very simple. How do we produce and how do we offer our knowledge? On the one hand, in Europe most of us are financed by the public sector. On the other hand, most of the knowledge we produce is protected by paywalls. How do the two fit together? If we really wish to offer knowledge 'beyond the ivory tower'—as a public good—we should carefully consider and analyse the current public-private battlefield on *open access*. There are many pros but some cons in regard to funding, and I would wish very much to have a wide debate on that in the ESA (write to the ESA member magazine *European Sociologist!*).

My second point is even more challenging in practice. Before demanding a better distribution of our knowledge (than that offered at ESA conferences), there are good reasons to reflect on the question of what *kind* of knowledge we bring to the meeting. What happens to sociological knowledge as we produce it today? Do enlightened scholars still determine knowledge or does knowledge production already determine us? No matter how heterogeneous 2900 presentations of papers seem to be, do they articulate the European sociology we want? We cannot evaluate so many papers in total, but we can briefly reflect on the conditions of their 'production'. I will leave aside other forces that also determine the current intellectual state of the discipline, such as the unavoidable pressure toward *fragmentation* and the *language divide* between 'English and the rest', and focus just on two of the more recent new 'diseases': (i) *Austeritis* and (ii) *Evaluitis*.

(i) The worldwide cutting of resources for research fosters a need to apply for them. In 2015 the severest cuts arguably happened in Finland and Japan. It is obvious that researchers who compete for funding are under enormous pressure to outline project proposals that fit into a research design that more or less stems from the natural sciences, that is, they need a *method* and they should preferably propose a *test* of any self-chosen small part of social reality. Insofar as C. W. Mills powerfully criticised how '[m]ethodology ... seems to determine the problems' of sociological research [2000: 57], the pressures for this have increased since the original publication of Mills's book in 1959.

(ii) In addition, since the logic of the *entrepreneurial university* has been introduced into the field of universities in many countries [cf. Lam 2010], many of us are subject to the externally steered numeric *research assessment*. It is no longer a circle of well-educated peers that determines the relevance of research questions. It is the assessment scheme that makes our searching for a *small but beautiful* specialisation, for instance, a specific part of one of the sociological subfields of our 37 ESA Research Networks. It is the assessment scheme that motivates us

to modify just one of our previously tested variables in order to quickly prepare a promising next paper.

*Austeritis* and *Evaluitis* not only allow for content-driven reflections by broadly educated scholars to be replaced by funding-oriented academic self-entrepreneurs. In my view, the conditions of sociological discourse are even worse. They affect the heart of the discipline. In a hidden alliance with the neoliberal power-shift from welfare institutions to individual responsibility, they foster the fracture of such formerly basic sociological categories as collective institutions, groups, and 'the social' by motivating methods and specialisation that make us focus on choices, taste, agents, differences, and identities, the agents *ex nihilo* that also underlie the microeconomic understanding of the Great Recession and its consequences and finally fuel the political ontology of a Hobbesian war of all against all. It will be difficult to propose how the sociological undertaking that searches for, identifies, and sometimes reifies a huge number of 'Differences, Inequalities (and Sociological Imagination)' (the ESA's 2015 conference topic) should be able to guide society and politics in finding a way out of that. If we take a sociological look at the existing conditions that restrain our capacity to perceive reality, the outlook seems to be less promising than our enthusiasm 'for change' would like to have it.

However, all that has to be taken as one more strong argument to invest even more in thinking carefully about a version and practice of sociology that goes beyond 'business as usual' as criticised by the Brno scholars, and therefore once again I am thankful for their initiative. The next ESA conference will be in Athens in late August 2017. The conference topic will be '(Un)Making Europe: Capitalism, Solidarities, Subjectivities', and a major organisational change along the track laid out by the Brno letter is already in the pipeline, since from now on we will no longer 'automatically' outsource the 'organisation of the event to an international conference provider'. While, in my view, 'Making' or 'Unmaking Europe' is not so much in the hands of a gathering of scholars, we will definitely try to offer our next ESA meeting with a good portion of 'solidarity', as promised by the title of the meeting.

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