

**DIFFERENCES
INEQUALITIES
AND SOCIOLOGICAL
IMAGINATION**

ESA 2015

**12TH CONFERENCE
OF THE EUROPEAN
SOCIOLOGICAL
ASSOCIATION 2015**

ABSTRACT BOOK

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ESA 12th Conference
Differences, Inequalities and Sociological Imagination
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European Sociological Association (ESA)
Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences (IS CAS)

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The Theme

A profound challenge that the social sciences, and sociology in particular, are now called upon to confront has to do with the depth and extraordinary acceleration of global processes of social and cultural change ...

... Today's byword 'globalisation' only partially captures the full significance of these processes. Sociological knowledge therefore encounters a limitation: it is easier to see what is disappearing than what is coming into being. Yet this limitation can be overturned and become a resource: a stimulus to intensify our theoretical and empirical exploration of the world around us by relating everyday life to history, connecting individual experiences to major issues of democracy and justice, and viewing the exercise of agency in the light of processes of domination. Sociological imagination is the tool that our discipline has honed over the decades to accomplish this.

But what are the major issues that the global sociological community now has the responsibility to tackle? First and foremost, they arise from the exponential increase in social inequalities, a process that the international economic crisis has exacerbated beyond measure. This situation threatens the very existence of democracy and calls for the construction of forms of social analysis which are strongly connected to the arena of public policy. Concurrently, these forms of analysis must also be capable of offering communities and individuals knowledge and insight that can help to stem the tide of fatalism and apathy.

Yet an analysis of how inequalities are produced and reinforced would be incomplete without reflection on differences. Recognising and acknowledging the multiple expressions of difference – such as gender, social class, age, ethnic background, religion, and sexual orientation... – are vital when it comes to gaining insight into the 'multiple positioning' that characterises contemporary individuals. And this entails rethinking the meaning of integration today.



The President's Welcome

Differences, inequalities and sociological imagination: These three keywords of the ESA conference that is about to open in Prague connect us directly not only to the profound changes distinguishing this phase of history, but also link us with the answers to these processes that the discipline we practice is able to identify. Our era is one of unprecedented private wealth – wealth that has actually doubled in just over a decade – and the concentration thereof into very few hands. Moreover, it is also an era of human migrations of biblical proportions affecting the entire globe, increasingly linked to an intermingling of political instability, violence and material poverty. Together, these dynamics create new inequalities and new differences, which jointly put into doubt the very possibility

of human coexistence on this planet. Of these specific differences, we can detect an increasingly ambivalent potential. They could have extraordinary transformative power, capable of challenging the past. At the same time however, they run the risk of violent implosion. The well-established global presence of terrorism reinforces this awareness.

In this difficult environment, we have an ever-increasing need for sociological knowledge, chiefly as an antidote to violence and the new winds of war that now threaten Europe itself. It should be emphasized that we also need to use this knowledge as a tool to overcome the temptation to reject those who are seeking asylum, the many displaced persons who put their lives at risk in order to survive in the long term. Sociology is capable of producing both the analytical tools that are able to grasp the scope and dynamics of these events, and – thanks to its close link to critical thinking – able to open the route for the construction of alternative scenarios. Our research and our knowledge can therefore help build new possibilities for human co-habitation on our planet, and adapt to the issues facing this century.

The Executive Committee and I, as President, are particularly proud of the contribution that the conference will bequeath through deep reflection on these phenomena, thanks to the employment of our sociological imagination. The conference's rich program, built first of all thanks to the contribution of the Research Networks, is able to respond effectively to the need for analysis and comparison. The Prague conference, the twelfth in ESA's history, promises to be one of the busiest ever organized by our association since its inception, with over three thousand participants expected. These positive results are the outcome of close collaboration between the Local Organizing Committee and its Chair, Tomáš Kostecký, and the Conference Programme Committee and its Chair, Tiziana Nazio, supported by the entire Executive Committee. Warm thanks for this excellent work.

I would like to note one last observation. This conference unites us in a very special city. Not only is Prague one of the most beautiful cities in Europe, with its artful Gothic and Baroque architecture; but it is also the city of the Prague Spring, Jan Palach, Václav Havel and Charter 77. It is a courageous city that has never surrendered to totalitarianism. Prague's message is one of hope, linked hand in glove to the power of ideas. There could be no better location from which to launch our labours.

Carmen Leccardi | *President of the European Sociological Association*