

Sociological Imagination for Future ESA Conferences

TEREZA STÖCKELOVÁ*

Institute of Sociology, Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague

In this forum we are publishing 'An Open Letter to the European Sociological Association: "Conference Business": as Usual?' written by three Czech junior scholars in reaction to the ESA conference held in Prague, along with a series of solicited responses from ESA representatives, members, and speakers at the last conference. Believing in the potential of the discipline and the sociological community to reflect on itself, we have taken this as an opportunity to come up with new ideas about the organisation and modes of participation at international academic conferences.

As some of the contributors argue, organising a conference as large as what the ESA conference has evolved into is a process constrained by many factors and uncertainties, which often go unseen and are hard to imagine for ordinary participants. It is thus, firstly, valuable to articulate and share these problems within the community. As sociologists we know that unless we remain aware of the often hidden infrastructures of everyday (academic) life we can understand little, let alone make a change. Secondly, while some of the infrastructures may be more persistent than we could easily imagine and wish for, we believe that even partial organisational changes have the potential to make a substantial effect. We hope that the current debate generates some ideas for realistic changes. Thirdly—and on this point we will need an even wider and ongoing debate within the community—our individual expectations, possibilities, and values may substantially differ. Yes, we are all academics, but we come from different parts of the world, economically and socially, we have gendered experiences of academia, we are at various stages in the academic hierarchy, and, importantly, we may differ in our understanding of sociology as a professional, policy, critical and public project. Spelling out the diversity of who we are and of our expectations is the first necessary step towards inclusivity, which we hopefully all hold dear.

In the forum we publish the Open Letter first, followed by reactions from people engaged in the organisation of the Prague event, who spell out some difficult practical issues involved in producing such a conference, issues that may at times take the wind out of the sails of the noble ideas put forth in the Open Letter. These contributions are from Tomáš Kostecký, the director of the Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences and the head of the Local Organ-

* e-mail: tereza.stockelova@soc.cas.cz.

ising Committee, and Tiziana Nazio, who was a member of the previous ESA Executive Committee. Three contributions follow by Mark Featherstone, Akosua Adomako Ampofo, and John Holmwood,, who set the issues raised in the letter within the wider context of academia today, in Europe and globally, but also offer some ideas about how things could be done differently at future conferences. Finally, we present contributions by Frank Welz, the current ESA president, and Laura Horn, the current ESA vice-president, who provide a grounded reflection of the Association's take on its conferences and European sociology more widely, and also offer concrete ideas for the future.

We hope that this forum is not the end but a new impulse for a debate that will continue. For this reason the authors of the Open Letter set up a weblog 'Conference Business' as Usual? (<https://conferencebusiness.wordpress.com>) where other ESA members, non-members, and not-yet members can join the debate. And it is hoped that the discussion will also continue elsewhere, as one thing is clear: an inclusive, socially responsible European sociological conference cannot simply be forged by local organisers or by the ESA leadership. It can only grow out of European sociologists' continuous engagement with socially relevant topics and out of their ties with local, national, and European publics, NGOs, and journalists and other non-academic actors. If sociology and other social sciences are performative in relation to the subject of their study, we must assume, as European researchers, the unavoidable responsibility we have for contributing to (un)making Europe and shaping European society and societies.