EDITOR’S MESSAGE

As last year’s ESA conference declared, Europe and sociological research are both in the midst of turbulent times. The single European currency and many states are struggling to cope with the fallout of an ongoing global economic crisis. At the same time, researchers across Europe find themselves under greater pressure due to reforms of their higher education systems and an increased market orientation of national and European funding bodies. In short, changes are rapidly taking place that possess long lasting implications for Europe’s sociological community and European societies.

In this issue, change and its accompanying challenges are a central theme: the President’s Message by Pekka Sulkunen and Dennis Smith’s Viewpoint both take up changes currently taking place and the challenges that we all now face; news from ESA’s Research Networks tells us of the establishment of a new Research Network, RN15 Global, Transnational and Cosmopolitan Sociology; and an extended interview article – Meet ESA’s New Executive Committee – introduces those elected to serve on the association’s Executive Committee during this current term (2011-2013). Additionally, there are two articles that evaluate the respective successes and challenges of the Pre-conference Doctoral Workshop and the 10th ESA Conference that were both held in September 2011.

This theme also extends beyond the content of this issue. Longtime readers may notice that European Sociologist has a new look. Indeed, a new editorial team has supervised this redesign. Despite appearing to look quite different from previous issues, as editor I now face the challenge of maintaining an excellent newsletter developed by my predecessor Shalva Weil. The members of the editorial team and I wish to thank Shalva for her wonderful work during her editorship.

Finally, I wish to encourage all ESA members to make use of this newsletter as a forum for discussion with regard to common issues faced by the sociological community in Europe and beyond. We welcome contributions to future issues from all, particularly as personal reflections, notes for discussion and human-interest stories. Furthermore, we are grateful for feedback and suggestions from our readers. Please address all correspondences to peter.holley@helsinki.fi.

Peter Holley
Helsinki, April 2012.

FEATURE ARTICLE

Viewpoint:
Dennis Smith on the current crisis in the EU.

In the European Union big government and big business are in approximate balance, certainly more so than in the United States, where private capital rules, or in China, where the state is still the unchallenged boss... Read more on page 4.
Flourishing sociology

Sociology is flourishing. The ESA conference in Geneva in September 2011 attracted a record number of almost 3000 attendants. We have close to 2000 members. The Americans maintain their attendance at above 5000 annually. Regional and national sociological associations in all parts of the developing and post-Communist world are rapidly gaining momentum, incorporating ideas from intellectual traditions very different from those on which Western social thought has been built. If sociological activity is on the rise, so is the need for it. World capitalism is facing a geographical and technological shift that in qualitative ways equals the discovery of the New Worlds and the Industrial Revolution, but in quantitative terms it is unforeseen in the history of mankind. The organization of societies and principles of their governance need to adapt to these shifts in circumstances where the nation-state is no longer a guarantee for belonging and solidarity, and where many kinds of forces tend to tear people apart but very few press them together. European society is in turmoil no less than any other. The so-called debt crisis is not an economic one – this is obvious for any social scientist worth the title. Nor is it a question of reckless overspending, nor of the banking or currency system as such. It is a matter of structural adaptation of economies, politics, institutions, lifestyles, belief-systems and of enormous inequalities in the intersections where parts of the world at very different levels of social development meet. Even in the North, these intersections are closer to us, than we may think – they are in fact already part of our daily life.

Sociology, the science of society, is absolutely necessary to study the preconditions of social cohesion in the contemporary world. However, sociology itself needs profound rethinking in relation to its own intellectual traditions in order to ask relevant questions and to suggest relevant answers.

Yet the next Framework Programme 2013-2020 on Science and Innovation of the European Union, so-called Horizon 2020, will not include social sciences and humanities as a separate subdivision in the Directorate General of Science and Innovation. Instead, the policy-oriented part is organized around the following “Grand Challenges”:

- Health, demographic change and wellbeing;
- Food security, sustainable agriculture, marine and maritime research, and the bio-economy;
- Secure, clean and efficient energy;
- Smart, green and integrated transport;
- Inclusive, innovative and secure societies;
- Climate action, resource efficiency and raw materials.

If you think that this is neither very innovative nor scientifically inspiring as a policy-relevant research programme, you should remember that this is the outcome of an enormous machinery of lobbying. Everybody wants to be in, and politicians from all countries demand that their countries’ contributions to the common research budget will deliver what taxpayers want. They want health, welfare and security – the holy trinity of goals that the enormous EU grinding mill of policy papers always emits, whatever their subject matter.

The European Sociological Association has participated at every possible occasion to protest against this type of science policy. First, our past President, Anália Torres, sent a personal letter to the Director General of Research and Innovation Robert-Jan Smits in 2010. Second, we responded to the “consultation” on the Green Paper on Horizon 2020, together with the UK Council of Professors and Heads of Department and the British Sociological Association in 2011, as well as with our own separate comment. Third, ESA also participated actively in the position papers that the Initiative for Science in Europe (ISE) has submitted to the Commission on Horizon 2020 and on the European Research Area (ERA). Although the ISE is mostly funded and managed by organizations of life sciences, their protests have strongly supported the importance of the social sciences and humanities (SSH) in European science funding. Many of our members have signed the open letter to the Commission protesting against the omission of the SSH in the coming research funding programme.

Our argument as sociologists in these communications has not only stressed the importance of the SSH in building European society. Our focus was on science policy in general. In the EU papers science is understood as a direct instrument of economically productive and profitable innovation. Massive evidence refutes this naive linear model of research-based development from basic science to applied research to innovation. Our concern, as expressed in our comments, is that short-sighted research investments into innovations are not only a waste of money but also destructive in many ways. A healthy research and innovation policy must guarantee scientific activity and reproduction of the science community also in the long term. Otherwise we do not have people who are competent and able to use research in their innovative work.

The same argument applies also to the long-time stress on “social innovation” in European research policy, still present in Horizon 2020. While this stress offers an important opportunity for sociologists to share the value of what we do, it is vital that this does not just have a short-term time line. The social sciences have a...
much more important function than helping to develop new methods for dealing with specific social problems. We need to participate in an intellectual assessment of the whole innovation project, and more: to contribute how and under what circumstances European society itself is possible.

Sociology has an impressive track record in understanding modern societies. The seven invited comments on the current European financial crisis, published in the first 2012 issue of European Societies, demonstrate that sociologists have important things to say about the ongoing shift in world capitalism and social order even today. This level of reflection on the end of the financialization period in capitalism is severely needed in Europe also.

Therefore, our concerns about Horizon 2020 and ERA 2020 go beyond science policy and the status of the SSH in it: if Europe wants to maintain a significant role in the world economy, its research base must be considerably renewed and made far more efficient than it is now. At present the narrow innovation-focused utilitarianism really leads to a gigantic waste of resources and time in negotiations such as the drafting of the Green Paper, the consultation we participated in, negotiations again on how the resulting formulations must be interpreted and turned into specific calls, and again at the stage when researchers’ applications responding to the calls will be considered. And as the Grand Challenges of the Horizon 2020 show, the compromises coming out of these negotiations tend to be anything but innovative and challenging.

The Commission’s response to the consultation was not negligible. We found some of our critical formulations in the final document sent to the European Council and Parliament, and we can be proud of that. Nevertheless, there is not going to be any subdivision for SSH in the Commission; Smits’ response to the letter by Anália Torres stated essentially that (a) social sciences will be included in all Grand Challenges, and (b) the European Research Council operates with a bottom-up principle of open calls so that researchers can take the initiative in defining what is important. The final structure of Horizon 2020 includes the SSH specifically in the Inclusive, Innovative and Secure Societies challenge.

We can only hope that the exceptionally wide and lively debate on the European science policy has had an impact on at least a few key actors. The fact is, however, that over the next seven years increasingly intensive lobbying will be required to include and formulate sensible social science calls in the “Grand Challenges”. ESA is of course interested in participating in this activity.

We are closely following the formation of a new network of scientific societies and academies called The European Association of Social Sciences and Humanities, and will consider a formal membership in the course of the next year. Still, it must be said that the system is more efficient at sapping the resources of associations than the associations are at influencing the Council, which is pressured by other, much more strongly resourced, forces such as the security industry, national bureaucracies, or institutions such as the defence and the police that now are eating the same pie with us.

However frustrating all this may seem, sociology is endowed with a responsibility that is much more important and wider than fighting for its share in European science funding. The whole concept of deliberative democracy, of which European science policy is just a small part, must be challenged as it is now implemented in the EU. And this practice of governance, in turn, is just a part of the bigger issue: Is European society possible at all? The question has enormous dimensions and the stakes are high. But we can do it. Of course we must use the European science funding resources whenever we can, and ESA will make every effort to ensure that this is possible. We are proposing to set up a European Social Science Forum, in which major social science issues can be critically discussed and informed opinions can be transmitted to the media and power holders. We are pursuing the idea of European social science laboratories that could provide hubs for data exchange and comparative analysis also for qualitative researchers. And we are organizing a high level science policy seminar in October 2012 (see elsewhere in this Newsletter) with senior representatives from the Commission, from the ERC, from ISA, ISE and the new European Alliance. We do want to continue the dialogue.

However, we are not completely dependent on European science policy. Our resources mostly come from national sources, our funding needs are modest compared to many other sciences, we have become very smart and efficient in building networks and working together. ESA itself has proved to be very efficient and important in this process; the unforeseen interest in organizing interim meetings of our Research Networks and Streams this year is a clear sign that sociology is both strong and needed. The upcoming bi-annual conference in Turin in 2013 will no doubt be another landmark to prove this.

by Pekka Sulkunen, ESA President
Why the current EU crisis matters, and not just to sociologists.

In the European Union big government and big business are in approximate balance, certainly more so than in the United States, where private capital rules, or in China, where the state is still the unchallenged boss. One distinctive feature of the EU is that citizens of member states can use their votes to make big trouble if they are dissatisfied with the transfer of national taxation revenue to Brussels. It follows that the European Commission has a very strong incentive to make sure its regulations are not just business-friendly but also citizen-friendly, consumer-friendly and worker-friendly. This limits exploitation by business and keeps a check on oppression by the state. This is good for sociologists because it allows them considerable intellectual freedom. It has also been good for ordinary citizens because, until recently at least, it has encouraged a European regime of relatively strong social rights, certainly as compared to the United States, for example.

Dennis Smith, emeritus professor at Loughborough University, past editor of Current Sociology, and one-time Vice-President for Publications of ESA, has written several books, including Globalization. The Hidden Agenda (Polity 2006).

Europe's most powerful politicians and bureaucrats know in broad terms where they want Europe to go, institutionally and politically. The game plan is to make the European Union more politically integrated, more democratic and more economically dynamic than it is now, each characteristic hopefully supporting the other two. The point is that only a strong, united and dynamic Europe will be able to talk on equal terms with China, the United States and Russia in the future.

Indeed, looking at those other countries, Russia and America have lost much of their old dynamism. Neither Moscow nor Washington seems sure where they are leading their peoples. However, these two old rivals appear comparatively stable when contrasted with the EU and China. The latter are both in a condition of highly dynamic disequilibrium, a condition that limits exploitation by business and keeps a check on oppression by the state. This is good for sociologists because it allows them considerable intellectual freedom. It has also been good for ordinary citizens because, until recently at least, it has encouraged a European regime of relatively strong social rights, certainly as compared to the United States, for example.

At this point the key word is responsibility: the responsibility of stronger members, including the strongest (Germany), to make resources available to weaker members in a non-humiliating way that elicits their cooperation in strengthening their economies to provide more growth, more jobs and more hope; and the responsibility of weaker members, including the weakest (Greece), to use those resources to expand jobs through economic growth without divert-
ing them to other uses. More humility and less hypocrisy all round would help, bearing in mind that Southern Europeans did not invent the practice of ‘bending the rules’ for personal and political convenience. It is also (for example) a German, French and British tradition. Bribery and corruption are, indeed, ‘the spectre haunting Europe’ (also, of course, China, the United States and all points of the compass).

Turning to Greece: the plight of protesters in Athens reminds me of New Orleans seven years ago. Hurricane Katrina burst the city’s defensive fortifications and the city was flooded. Why did this happen? Because neither local politicians nor federal government accepted responsibility for making sure the task of strengthening the fortifications was carried through. When the inevitable disaster occurred, ordinary citizens were humiliated, being told from ‘outside’ and ‘above’ that they, the victims, actually deserved what they got because they had not been more aware of the dangers. This was profoundly unfair, and the citizens of New Orleans felt let down and abandoned by those whose task it was to look after their interests. The parallel is clear: as in New Orleans, so in Athens, although in New Orleans the flood dispersed or destroyed the population so there was no angry crowd in the central square.

For sea defences in New Orleans read fiscal reform in Greece. The bottom line is that now, in 2012, the Greeks cannot obtain the material resources they need to rebuild their lives. Loans that eventually arrive are intended to repay big European banks, not create new jobs, growth and opportunities for Greek citizens. Denied the hope of reform and reconstruction, many Greeks are calling for revenge. The big political parties in Greece will suffer. Meanwhile, the Greek media have launched an energetic anti-German campaign.

There is deep irony here. For geopolitical reasons, the EU needs to shore up its South-eastern flank, where danger lurks from the wreckage of ex-Yugoslavia, for years a bloody arena of victimization and revenge. Ex-Yugoslav states such as Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina are being actively encouraged to move towards membership of the EU. Greece is on the same front line, a near neighbour of the countries just mentioned, and surely a great political asset: a member of the EU for over thirty years whose population have shown great enthusiasm for the European project. But the current crisis and the EU response are set to stir up political instabiltiy and a spirit of vengeance in Greece. How will that play in the Balkans? The EU’s approach to Greece is massively inconsistent with its ‘south-eastern’ strategy.

As a matter of urgency, European ‘debt politics’ needs to move on from victimization and revenge towards conciliation and reform backed by funds directed to growth, employment and the needs of ordinary people. The sooner this happens, the sooner we can resume the task of building a strong united and democratic European Union.
Evaluating the 10th Conference of the European Sociological Association, September 2011, in Geneva

Social Relations in Turbulent Times was the topic of the 10th ESA Conference, held in September 2011 in Geneva. The ESA Conference was an important milestone in enhancing the capacity of sociologists to comprehend and address the constant changes taking place in the current world (see photo 1). Besides this huge task, the content of the ESA Conference was a major organisational challenge for the local organising committee. Indeed, the Department of Sociology at the University of Geneva welcomed around 3000 participants, worked with over 120 volunteers and organised hundreds of meetings.

It is now little over half a year after the 10th ESA Conference and life at the Department of Sociology, University of Geneva – the main organiser of the conference – has returned to its daily routine. Almost all reports to our sponsors have been written and only a few last signs in the corridors remind of the big conference that took place (see photo 2 with our central place of the department – the Place de la Vache).

To gain a more accurate impression of how our participants felt about the event, we asked them to fill out an online survey. The response rates were quite good as one third of all participants (around 900 people) followed the invitation to answer. In general the trends were very clear and not controversial. However, some results were quite puzzling, in particular there was a unanimous negative judgement of our catering services: 81% judged it negatively (29% said that the quality was average, 52% even judged the quality bad or very bad). Therefore we have to think seriously about catering when we next invite people to Geneva! A more qualitative analysis of these figures (including mails we received and feedback during the conference) allows us to identify two main problems: first, it was not the quality of the food that was the main problem, but the price one had to pay for it. Even if people developed strategies for spending less money in Geneva – i.e., trying to be invited by a colleague or by the thesis supervisor for a meal or buying drinks in nearby shops and not in the University refectory – the majority seem to have been shocked by having to pay around 2€ for a coffee, 3€ for a Coke and 12€ for a meal. We might also observe the launch of a fledgling social movement at the conference in regard to this issue. Perhaps ESA was even a precursor of the movement of Indignados (see photo 3).

Photo 1 The opening of the 10th ESA Conference at Victoria Hall (Analia Torres, former president of the ESA). Photo: SC 2011

Photo 2 Place de la Vache and lost signs of the conference. What will be their future? Photo: SC 2011

Secondly, the lack of free alcohol, caffeine, tea and cookies, in other words drugs and sugar as fundamental elements for presenting papers and for the afterhours events of conference, has been criticised, as a colleague puts it in a nutshell:

Dear Professor Sandro Cattacin,

As a participant of the ESA 10th Conference in Geneva I am pleased to thank you for the organization of the conference, which was another opportunity to meet colleagues from Europe and the rest of the world, to exchange ideas, and to come into new contacts.

There was, however, a few things that awaked lesser enthusiasm of not only myself but also some other colleagues I spoke with. First, excursions were a valuable supplement to sessions. While planned around the lunchtime they collided, however, with the sessions after the lunchtime [...].

Secondly, having a rather long experience of participation in conferences and congresses, I was very astonished to find that no single cup of tea during the whole conference was offered to participants within the registration fee. In this context, I felt highly uncomfortable to pay for any soft drink and sandwich - additionally to the fee. Let me add that during any conference I have ever organized, registered participants were free to drink tea, coffee, juice, mineral water etc., as well as eat cookies as much as they wanted. Moreover, even unregistered participants were not inspected whether or not they used the opportunity to have soft drinks.

[...] Registered participants of the [name of an other scientific association] Congress, else dispensed from the conference fee, were free to have drunk unlimited quantity of wine or brandy, not to mention soft drinks and cookies, and were neither inspected nor forced to exchange coupons for a single glass of wine. I understand Switzerland is a much poorer country than [name of the country of the above mentioned congress] so the economic restrictions imposed on participants must have been stricter. [...]

Generally therefore I must sadly agree with Erich Fromm that rich is one who gives much rather than possesses much.

Wishing you all the best, [author].

Despite the quite radical critique concerning the catering (or perhaps because of it), 83% of the participants would nonetheless recommend ESA Conferences to colleagues and only 11% declared that they don’t intend to participate at the next congress. So, in other words, 89% hope the catering will be better and cheaper in Turin!

A more fundamental critique concerns the social and artistic programme of the conference, as only 22% of the participants, who answered to the survey, declared that the social and artistic programme was an important element of the ESA congress. 33% declared the quality of the proposed programme (without the opening) as average, 54% even as bad or very bad. And this is for us a very nice result as we really intended to provoke by bringing contemporary art to an audience of sociologists. We are still convinced that it was important to invest a lot of energy and money inviting independent Swiss artists to realise diverse unsettling performances during the whole conference, and by doing so creating turbulences – or as Luhmann would say noise – inside the ESA-conference system (see photo 4 as example).
The survey results clearly indicate - and this is interesting - that sociologists are not more keen on following contemporary art events than the general population. Only 4% said that the social and artistic programme as well as the congress party were very good, a result which is only a little better score than the mean of the population in Geneva for instance, that follows contemporary art events. Perhaps this difference might be explained by the particular engagement of the organisers, who danced with as many people as possible (see photo 5). So we state that sociologists are not special but have the same orientations as the general population. This is also supported by study results of Carlo M. Cipolla who found out, that the distribution of bandits and other special characters was always the same.1

The best evaluation results of our survey received related to the scientific programme, as only 10% of the participants were not satisfied with our efforts here. The congress buildings were seen as sufficient, good or very good by 80% of the participants (see photo 6 as example for a conference room). Information sent prior to and during the conference was judged clear and sufficient by 84% and 81% respectively. Also, 90% of participants were happy about the staff support (see photo 7)!

So let us have a final look at what happened to the conference staff. The person responsible for the volunteers left the university in order to start a career as an event manager (see photo 8). Patricia went on holiday and Sandro has finished a book following a two-year delay and is now researching and teaching again. They have now decided again – courageously and fully convinced – to organise a conference combining lectures with arts performance! Il vizio resta (“the vices remain”).

Sandro Cattacin and Patricia Naegeli
(local organising committee)

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The selection process was highly competitive; more than 220 abstracts were submitted. The successful candidates were selected following a peer-review process, taking into account first and foremost quality of the abstract but also additional criteria such as place, disciplinary approach and methodology and also gender in order to assure a fair chance for PhD students from all areas of Europe and from the various sociological sub-disciplines.

At the closing of the workshop students were asked for an evaluation and feedback on the quality of the PhD Workshop and any suggestions for future workshops. Overall, the feedback was very positive; the PhD students enjoyed the workshop and being part of the ESA network of scientists. Most importantly, they suggested having fewer lectures (1 per day) and more time for discussion and individual feedback. As usual, the students wished to have more time for discussing their research, but they were also realistic about what is possible to organize within the context of a fully funded pre-conference workshop.

The most popular lecture was on ‘publishing as a PhD student’. The students were very positive about the structure of the seminars that included: four papers per 1.5 hour time slot, each to be presented by the author (7 minutes) and commented upon by a discussant (7 minutes), followed by a plenary discussion (30 minutes). Furthermore, the students appreciated the opportunities for networking and exchanging experiences with other PhD students; they also highly appreciated the effort taken to select a diverse group of students that reflects the diversity of sociology and sociologists in Europe.

In summary, this was a very successful and inspiring event – from the perspective of the organisers – and I wish to thank all those who made this possible. In order to gain further insight into this ESA PhD Workshop, it is better see the individual reports of PhD students from universities across Europe, who discuss both the opportunities and the challenges of taking part.

Ellen Kuhlmann, ESA Vice President, Chair of the PhD Committee 2009-11

1. Renata Motta: Doctoral Student, Dahlem Research School, Freie Universität Berlin, Germany

Last year it was the first time I that took part in an ESA Conference. I was excited about being given so many opportunities to actively participate, since I had been selected for the pre-conference PhD Workshop and was also going to present my research twice at the conference. For the workshop, we were asked to prepare and present a paper, as well as to read each other’s work and act reciprocally as commentators. I presented my paper “Shaping discourse and policy for genetically modified food: risk for whom?” and received important feedback, especially from the session chair. Furthermore, I volunteered to moderate one session. At this early stage of my career, it was a good to gain experience of the academic responsibilities that we must take on board. The participants came from universities from all over Europe and we had a rich exchange of experiences and ideas. I also found the lecture we had with the editor of a journal very informative, as this taught us how to write a paper for a peer-review publication.

At the Conference, I presented the preliminary results of my data collection and analysis at research networks on the “Sociology of Risk and Uncertainty” and “Social Movements”. In both cases it was crucial for me to receive feedback from scholars who are working with similar topics or with the same theoretical background. These presentations also gave me insight into the work that they are currently undertaking. I was able to confirm the adequacy of some methodological decisions I have made and, more significantly, I received suggestions on how I might improve the interpretation of my data in my search for explanations. It was very exciting to have, among the audience, authors whose work I have read and quoted giving me feedback! Another highlight was to get to know the organizers of the networks, who, in addition to their excellent and inspiring work, kept sending us information about future events and other opportunities. With some people I have met, I hope to establish long lasting relationships and perhaps work with them in the future.

Last but not least, I would like to emphasize the importance of receiving the scholarship from ESA. For many students, there is no funding to participate in conferences. ESA paid our conference fee and accommodation in exchange for our work as volunteers. In contrast to most of my colleagues from the PhD Workshop, I didn’t have to work as I was fortunate enough to receive funding from my home institution. Finally, I would like to suggest that volunteering should be restricted to few hours to enable the participants of the PhD Workshop to take full benefit of such an important event!
2. Antti Silvasti: Doctoral Student, Department of Social Research, University of Helsinki, Finland

A two-day pre-conference PhD workshop was held at the last year’s ESA conference in Geneva. I participated in the workshop as one of the 24 PhD candidates from around a dozen different European countries.

Both days of the workshop had a similar schedule. The day started with common lectures about writing a PhD and issues related to social research. The participants then presented their dissertation research in parallel workshops. All candidates were given seven minutes to talk and receive comments for about the same duration from a named discussant. The idea was that only these two could discuss the paper, but a joint discussion concluded a session of three to four papers. We also had a dinner and a number of others meetings in Geneva. All workshop participants were furthermore asked to work for the ESA conference by registering people when they arrive. These desk responsibilities continued each day for the entire conference.

The second key impression I took away concerns the scope of the work that sociologists are doing. I have often worried about the “position” of my thesis and how it relates to other popular social research topics. However, even with a great diversity within the presented studies, the participants still managed to generate lively discussions, both in the sessions and outside of them. Social researchers may indeed study very different topics, but I left the workshop thinking that certain practices and ways of thinking are shared among sociologists and that we ultimately seek to do the same thing.

3. Tiago Correia: Post-Doctoral Researcher, Centre for Research and Studies in Sociology, Lisbon University Institute, Portugal/Post-doctoral Fellow, Department of Health Administration, University of Montreal, Canada.

Graduate students who aim at following a career in academia know how important is to meet two at least requisites. One is a PhD degree; the other is to enter into debate at an international level. Actually, to get involved in an international structure really benefits those who are starting their training. Not only does it prepare one to face strong competition, but it provides a wide context for discussion. This is important as everyone knows how solitary PhD research can be.

The 2011 ESA PhD Workshop held in Geneva was a worthwhile experience. Writing about it reminds me of the day when I received my acceptance letter after a fierce competition against hundreds of applications from all over Europe. It was even more important as some time later I was defending my thesis on a complex theme: the expectation of managerialism in controlling doctors’ behaviour in the Portuguese hospitals. For me, this would be the last opportunity to discuss my work and to realize how ready I was to defend it.

For a participant, one key conclusion from this rich and diverse event no doubt relates to the importance of doing concrete things together. Being an opponent to a paper, spending time together, seeing the conference registrations and even living in the same hostels all helped create a specific social atmosphere, which is not that common at a large event. Hence, despite highly structured workshop sessions, it was easy to pass suggestions and talk about one’s research especially less formally. To anyone looking at ways to engage with a large conference, I can seriously recommend trying a pre-conference PhD workshop.

Sharing sociology as a common interest, a diversified group – both geographically and conceptually – of skilled graduate students was gathered. During those hard-working days the experience was thrilling. The environment surrounding the Workshop was informal but quite professional, with senior sociologists from the ESA PhD Committee and the Local Organizing Committee truly devoted in providing us with the most desirable scientific context. It is never easy to find the best solution when it comes to managing a short experience like this. Nevertheless, in my opinion, which I think my colleagues also share, the workshop exceeded our expectations. Firstly, because we had to prepare papers to be distributed in advance. This way we were required not only to develop an argument in a publishable manner (we know how important that is), but to act as peer-reviewers of each other’s work. Secondly, because a group of well-known sociologists from different fields gave us lectures on interesting topics, we received excellent training concerning theories and processes of social change in turbulent times.

Additionally, the fact that this workshop took place prior to the main conference allowed some of us to take part in various sessions and workshops. This way not only did they contribute to the success of the ESA Conference, but the experience also fostered a sense of belonging to the European sociological community amongst the young sociologists taking part.
A new Research Network: RN15 Global, Transnational and Cosmopolitan Sociology

At the 10th ESA Conference in Geneva a new Research Network was born. Although formally constituted in January 2012, RN15 Global, Transnational and Cosmopolitan Sociology took its first steps in Geneva. It emerged from the integration of two dynamics: (i) the experience of the RN on Globalization that unfortunately could not organize a workshop at the 10th Conference, but whose coordinators were able to stimulate some fruitful thoughts and discussion in a business meeting; and (ii) the new inputs from the Research Stream 26 Global and Transnational Sociology, and the committed researchers who participated in its sessions. Attempts to meet each other in Geneva did not completely succeed. However, with some basic ideas, email communication made it possible to agree on some of the fundamental questions, issues and objectives.

Our research Network shares the following understandings:

1. Globalization is considered a too vague as a concept, even more within the huge globalization industry. After forty years as part of the academic vocabulary, attempts to understand the increasingly interconnected realities in which we live have generated many thousands of pages of both theoretical and empirical research (almost 40,000 books were published worldwide by 2010 with the key words global or globalization in the Bowker’s list of Global Books in Print). According Held et al.’s (1999) definition, “globalization can be thought of as the widening, intensifying, speeding up, and growing impact of world-wide interconnectedness”. Thus, in order to clarify what globalization really means sociologically, a global sociology approach is deemed necessary.

2. A transnational sociology aims to develop further what Robinson in 1998 problematized in the Sociological Forum paper “Beyond Nation-State Paradigms: Globalization, Sociology, and the Challenge of Transnational Studies”. Social reality is regarded as still significantly shaped by the increasingly changing Westphalian model of nation-state. Cultures, however, are not confined to nation-states, even if comparative works confirm the widely accepted thesis that national contexts still impact considerably people’s conditions. In most fields of the social sciences inter-, multi-, supra-, cross- and trans-national phenomena and dynamics are becoming increasingly relevant. Thus, a transnational sociology can integrate most of these concepts, can cover a broad variety of sociological issues, and can look at how diverse social groups and actors develop relations and interplay beyond nation-state boundaries.

3. Finally, cosmopolitan sociology is rooted in the idea we live in a world of overlapping communities of fate. One of the most exciting issues related to the cosmopolitanisation of the world is the emerging of a global awareness among people. One of the widely accepted consequences of the globalized, mobile society is the development of individual outlooks, behaviors and feelings that transcend local and national boundaries. The basic presupposition of cosmopolitan sociology is that “the human species can be understood only if it is treated as a single subject, within which all forms of difference are recognised and respected but conceptualised as internal of the substantive unity of all human beings” (R. Fine, 2007). Cosmopolitanism as a moral concern can orient us, based on truly empirically sociological analysis, to envisioning prospects and proposals for human rights development for the humanity of the 21st century.

Overall, it is clear that a new, multi-level social reality is emerging and being constituted. A critical case-in-point is highlighted by the emergence of Europe (i.e., the EU) as an actor worldwide dynamics. In sum, a social reality beyond the modern nation-state that is calling for systematic analysis and understanding; an analysis that will work to develop both theories and methods for the sociological understanding of these emerging realities.

This is a sociological project to understand the world of the 21st century that requires collaboration between the different specialized fields of sociology.

RN15 Global, Transnational and Cosmopolitan Sociology has a board balance across geographical divides in Europe, mainly North and South; and also a strength across the different sub-disciplines of sociology, from political and cultural sociology to organization, business and economic sociology, through many other broad or narrow fields and themes. We want to appeal to all interested in the multi-level, supra-national and globalizing dimensions of current social reality to join us to pursue this collaborative endeavour. We have already organized our first focused meeting or mini-conference in next August: within the 3rd International Conference on Power & Difference, which will take place between the 27th and 29th August 2012. This conference is organized by and takes place at the University of Tampere, Finland. Here, we will discuss and advance the global, transnational and cosmopolitan sociology of power.

You can see the description of the RN Global, Transnational and Cosmopolitan Sociology here, at ESA’s website.

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Meet ESA’s New Executive Committee

At the tenth conference of the European Sociological Association (ESA) that took place in Geneva, Switzerland in September 2011, eighteen individuals representing universities from across Europe were elected to serve for two years on ESA’s Executive Committee (2011-2013). There are some old faces that have served as members of past executives, but most are new comers, elected for the first time. Whilst the names of those serving appear on the association’s website, ESA members rarely get to know the sociologists who work tirelessly to ensure European Sociology maintain its voice and its relevance amongst the cacophony of voices that seek to gain influence in a world in which the production of knowledge often is considered secondary to the market-driven forces steering national and European research programmes (see the President’s Messages on page 2 for more on this topic). In keeping with past issues of European Sociologist, the following article introduces the members of ESA’s 2011-2013 Executive Committee by asking them four brief questions (seen opposite). Their responses are listed in alphabetical order.
When at school I was very fond of philosophy and especially the philosophy of science. I was uncertain the direction my studies should take and I had to choose between specializing in physics and philosophy at the first stage of my university career. I thought that both of these disciplines were privileged tools to understand our contemporary world and a precondition to make it become a better one. When it was time to take my decision regarding my field of study at university, I found, on my father’s desk, a booklet about a degree in Political Science. Looking into it I discovered that the Sociology syllabus was full of texts by Popper, Frege, Wittgenstein and other philosophers of science I loved so much. It was the 1975 and all students, in those days, were politically committed and dreamed of changing social institutions and the existing social order. So was I, and engaging myself in such a degree in Political Science seemed an unexpected yet promising way to make both things possible at one time: to follow my intellectual preferences and to satisfy my social and political commitment. That was my first step towards becoming a sociologist.

Within sociology, my favourite areas of study are science and technology studies, welfare regimes, and gender studies. I have always been cultivating interests also in general sociological theory and methodology. My preferences are, on the one hand, a result of what my original interests were when I began to study and conduct sociological research (STS, in particular as a perspective to study society in general, from the upcoming of finance as a regulating institution to globalization as well) and, on the other, of my sociological studies, as they developed along the way. I think the European social model and its welfare regimes have been a great social innovation and are – nowadays – seriously at risk. The process through which this model is being attacked – economically, politically and culturally – deserves to be studied, paying great attention in order to make visible possibly that such welfare regimes might be rescued. Coming to women and gender studies, they are a transversal, illuminating, the relatively undervalued perspective through which society can be understood. Such perspectives, in particular, possess implications for and new understandings of the transformation of the welfare state, and of science and technology too.

I am proud of myself when I’m doing my best work, be it while teaching, doing research, or writing and publishing. I have always enjoyed doing research in methodology and general theory, but I am more proud of having succeeded in transforming some of my sociological research into a collective endeavour. This has happened with most of my research projects on welfare, in which I succeeded in pulling together other colleagues in a collective effort within an original and, I think, illuminating perspective. I am also proud of my work in the sociology of science, a field that was not so much cultivated in Italy when I started to work in it, and where with a few pioneering colleagues, we opened the way for a new generation of researchers who have established what is now a very lively research field and a new scientific association, STS- Italia. Finally, I am very proud and grateful for having been elected to the Executive Committee of ESA, not only with the votes of many individual Italian and not-Italian colleagues, but also with the declared support of RN 33, the Women and gender studies network. This was an honour and a responsibility too.
The contribution of sociological knowledge to contemporary society is as important as much as it is currently of unacknowledged value. We need much a more sociological understanding to be spread in the collective cultural frameworks people live in: this is the only key towards a more reflexive democracy through a more reflexive understanding of social institutions and regulating systems. Sociology can help understand the social world is not regulated by immutable rules because it is a human endeavour, whose rules are changing while institutions change; that the rules of the markets are the results of the different markets as they have been historically established and that they could be transformed if differently regulated; that which appears new (so called new technologies, for example) may function according to well-known and not so new rules, while what appears old (the family, for example) may function according to unexpectedly changing regulating mechanisms.

Sociological competence and sociological skills – the capability to find and give meaning to data relating to social phenomena; the sociological imagination necessary to link biographical destinies to structural and historical understandings – should be a necessary part of the education of people, especially those with public influence and collective responsibilities.

I wonder if I ever really decided! I got fed up with studying engineering after two years and then I thought that I would become a journalist, so I applied for the University of Tampere to study journalism and was accepted. I then worked as a journalist at some newspapers during the summers. So then, when I completed my MA thesis, I won a prize and I was offered work the day right after handing it in. I just happened to become a researcher!

I’m primarily interested in cultural sociology, but also in global and transnational issues nowadays. Why? I wonder if there is any particularly good reason. I’ve always done what I think is interesting and important. That has led me to do this kind of research.

That’s a tough one. I wonder? I guess in a way the Researching Culture: Qualitative Method and Cultural Studies (Sage, 1995) textbook. I’m still pleased with it and it has been a steady seller for twenty years. I still can read it and be surprised - actually it is quite good!

Well if we go on strike the nation will be in peril! There is a coffee mug in the ASA (American Sociological Association) shop with a picture of a guy reading the newspaper and the headline that says ‘Sociologists On Strike! Nation In Peril!’
I decided to become a sociologist after studying the subject as an undergraduate. Thinking of C. Wright Mills and the Sociological Imagination, it seemed to me then that sociology stood out amongst the social sciences for its capacity to connect personal experiences with the development and formations of wider societies or, as he put also put it, our ‘personal troubles’ with ‘public issues’. Alongside this, sociology was and still is concerned with the study of inequality and with social justice, something that has always been at the top of my own research agenda. I came to the field of sociology of health and illness through an interest in the sociology of organisations, and in particular the study of how – for better or for worse - organisational politics, practices and ways of working impact upon the type and quality of care individuals receive. The field of health and healthcare was an attraction to me, and remains so, because of its practical facility to diagnose the upstream (beyond individuals) causes of public ills.

I am most interested in the two fields of the sociology of health and illness and the sociology of gender. Especially, I am interested in their intersection; that is, ‘gender and health’. The connection between the social relations of gender and the health status and healthcare of men and women worldwide is enduring and strong. In other words, sex and gender are mutually constituted. Consequently the study of health is a powerful lens into the nature of society, albeit one that can be overlooked by many sociologists. The differences and similarities between the health of men and women are both exceedingly complex and highly responsive to social context. Gender-related patterns of morbidity and mortality are, for example, extremely sensitive to social changes within and between societies as a result of economic downturns, social restructuring, and social conflicts, which are very swiftly marked on the body and more often than not differentially affect the life chances of men and women, boys and girls.

The aspect of my work of which I am presently most proud is my affiliation with the journal *Social Science & Medicine*. It is the world’s most cited social science journal (Thomson ISI) with an impact factor of 2.742. As Editor-in-chief since 2004 I have had the opportunity to work with excellent senior editorial teams and it is a continuing privilege to be able to support and publish the work of early career and established authors not only from Europe but also other parts of the world. The journal’s signal feature is its interdisciplinarity, publishing empirical and theoretical papers from sociology as well as anthropology, economics, geography, policy, social epidemiology, psychology. Through working with *Social Science & Medicine* I have come to appreciate that theories and concepts (and research methods too) now belong less to one social science discipline and more to all. The most exiting work often now takes place at the interface of the disciplines and through interdisciplinary engagement.
Increased global connectivity directs our attention to the shared vulnerability and precariousness of lives and health around the world. Sociology as a discipline provides us with the conceptual tools to diagnose and analyse the effects of highly complex systemic social change upon the lives of individuals and groups in different places (often with different cultures, norms and values). More often than not these effects are embodied, making, by way of illustration, the sociology of health an ideal conduit for analysing connected societies. Indeed, it may examine the consequences of new mobilities within Europe and beyond; new ways of governing bodies, biopolitics and new forms of production such as the extraction of biovalue from the body; through to the securitization of health. In my view, such analyses need to be syncretic and to draw on the wider conceptual and methodological tools of the social sciences because so-called ‘wicked’ or compound problems, such as the analysis of increasing global complexity and what this means for the wellbeing of individuals and social groups, set apart by unequal access to resources for a good life, need to be addressed using a wide combination of skills and multiple or ‘mixed’ method approaches.

Which forms of knowledge or special skills can sociologists offer contemporary society?

Until 1974 Portugal was a dictatorship; sociology was not taught at universities. When it came time to choose a programme of study in 1979, I was filled with doubts. I knew that I was interested in the study of societies and the organization of the social fabric, but I was not sure about the best disciplinary approach through which to pursue my interests. So, I decided to risk it and signed up to a degree programme in this new discipline. Looking back, I can now say that becoming a sociologist is a permanent learning process, which allows us to shed light on social life and social interactions beyond everyday common-sense understandings.

Urban sociology became one of courses that I was most enthusiastic about as a student, mainly because of its subjects, its methodologies and the conceptual questions that arose from it. Portugal was, at that time, a rural society living a strong urban growth, affecting the entire country. As we all know, nowadays the majority of the World’s population are living in the cities and its effects are becoming one of the main areas of research for sociologists. It is also fascinating due to the possibilities of working within interdisciplinary teams, involving anthropologists, geographers, historians, architects and many others. Being born and growing up in Lisbon, a cosmopolitan city on the Atlantic coast, I’ve had the chance to live in a permanent laboratory in which to observe urban change.

Regarding the professionalization of sociologists, I have always been involved in scientific associations because of my concern, as a teacher, about the next generation’s future. I have previously served as the president of the Portuguese Sociological Association (APS), where we have always tried to reconcile academic work with professional experiences.

Luis António Vicente Baptista
Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas,
Universidade Nova de Lisboa (New University of Lisbon), Portugal

Why did you decide to become a sociologist?

In which area(s) of sociology are you most interested? Why?
I’ve always tried to reconcile the different activities I’m involved in. I cannot say which of my current or past activities I’m proudest of because, at different moments of my academic life, I’ve done so many different things that I take pride in and which give me great satisfaction in being part of. By way of example, one aspect of my work of I am proud, is creating the conditions for new and young sociologists to conduct sociological research. This is, however, neither particularly visible nor explicit. It is rather part of my job description as director of CesNova (a research unit at the New University of Lisbon).

Also, as member of APS, I highlight my attempts to internationally promote Portuguese sociology. Indeed, I similarly take pride in sociology’s contribution to institutional quality and functioning within the Portuguese context.

It depends on the specific context or professional activity. As researchers, we contribute accurate evaluations that influence the application of informed public policies. As professionals within the organizational arena, we can contribute to the improvement of the quality and functioning of work environments. As active social observers, sociologists have trained skills that allow us to make more reflexive, accurate and careful observations of the multiple aspects of social life. Sociologists can make an important contribution to institutions and their improvements, but also, and decisively, we can contribute to the development of more evolved democracies.

I was extremely interested in people and their activities in society. My main concern was the dynamics of conflict and peace. I decided to become a sociologist to understand it.

The sociology of conflict, political sociology, armed forces and society, and research methods. My interest in the armed forces and the sociology of conflict developed from a political concern about violent conflict and the social institutions aimed at dealing with it.

I am equality proud (and sometimes frustrated) with all of them. It is not always easy to conciliate them.

Sociologists should be able not only to produce accurate knowledge about social processes, but also be adept at bridging it with social intervention and policy-making. This translation effort is increasingly important (even strategic) if Sociology is to be of any help for societies, states and people alike to build a better world and more balanced and fair societies.
When I was adolescent I was extremely interested in cultural diversity, language and history. I remember that I was deeply moved by Levi Strauss’s book *Race and History* and I decide to move from Italy, where I was born, to Paris. Other great thinkers of that period inspired me, such as Fernand Braudel, Michel Foucault, Michel de Certeau and Jean-Pierre Vernant. I did not decide to become a sociologist, but it was quite natural to me to embrace a science-based understanding of societies. Indeed, since this period, I have believed that sociology needs to be nourished by history, anthropology and geography.

I have been working on adolescence and youth for several years. I often intend in my work to address both adolescence and youth as an object of knowledge as well as an object of policy intervention. It is largely shared assumption that the circulation of knowledge between different kinds of spheres of discourses (media, scientific, policy and administrative discourses) is a major feature of knowledge-based societies.

After several years of working on comparison of youth conditions in Europe, I am strongly involved in enhancing post-national perspectives.

The perspective I am working from is focused on understanding in which ways young people engage with globalization. The impact of globalization on biographical trajectories, lifestyles and everyday life addresses several challenging issues for social scientists: are we witnessing an extension of belonging to a wider world? What about the sense of local belonging in a supposedly cosmopolitan age? How to understand the processes of socialisation to cultural plurality? How do people living in contemporary societies, both national and transnational experience cosmopolitan identities? I think that to answer to these questions, it is necessary to take into account the narratives of ordinary people instead of archetypal cosmopolitans such as global business elites, refugees, and expatriates.

I am proud of all my publications, even if I have my favourites. I do like my forthcoming book, *L’esprit cosmopolite* (the cosmopolitan spirit). Its focus is on awareness of one’s cultural pluralism, the place that ‘otherness’ is granted within one’s own identity and the broadening sense of one’s national belonging at various levels. This awareness can be termed *Cosmopolitan Bildung*. I show that a sense of familiarity is certainly the bedrock of cultural adherence. But at the same time, in a world made up of connected cultures that under the pressure of globalisation, familiarity cannot be the only yardstick by which one can measure reality and identity.

Thanks to Erasmus exchange programs, I travel extensively lecturing and teaching throughout Europe.

And last, but not least, I am proud to present my new book series (Brill Publisher, Leyden and Boston): “Youth in a Globalizing World”. We will start with a book edited by Teresa Toguchi Swartz, Douglas Hartmann and Ruben Rumbaut: *Inside the Diverse Transitions to Adulthood: How Young
This collection deals with some of the most pressing questions and issues that face young, coming-of-age Americans in an increasingly diverse, globalizing world. The interviews provide an in-depth, insider’s look at the diverse ways young adults themselves understand themselves and the challenges, risks, and opportunities of this still little understood phase in the life course.

In my view, sociology must cooperate more closely with other Human Sciences in order to better understand the great transformations we are witnessing. We live in a world of “overlapping communities of fate” where the trajectories of all countries are deeply enmeshed with each other (Held). In our globalised world, the interactions between States raises the question of how issues that overtake national borders can be regulated. What kind of answers a collective identity is able to give to the major challenges of globalisation? How each civilisation, nation or other human groups contribute to build a common world? As we live in a world connected and plural, formulating a “cosmopolitan” approach lays to adopt a universalistic outlook and to respect cultural differences.

This is, to me, the crucial form of sociological knowledge sociology must offer to our societies.

My early education was founded upon two strategically decisive bases: Socialism, at political level (thanks to the influence of an uncle of mine who was a socialist of the old early twentieth-century type) and Catholicism (which saw me actively involved from an early age in pastoral work of an educational nature, including sport). Both domains made me particularly open-minded towards and interested in social issues, community life and respect for people. At university (where I enrolled in the Faculty of Literature and Philosophy) I discovered Sociology, thanks to the fascinating and persuasive teaching of Professor Franco Ferrarotti. I soon had no doubts: I would devote myself to that field of study.

My degree thesis focused on the “religious” sociology of Italy. From then on, I began investigating the phenomenon of religion but I also realized that in order to find an adequate way of interpreting findings quantitative data alone were not sufficient and so I set out to develop a qualitative methodology (also with the help of computers) as well as a multi-method approach, believing that neither perspective (quantitative nor qualitative) could, on its own, provide an acceptable reading mode for the sociology of religion. I also went deeply into the history of religion and the relative documentation, working in a number of important archives (for example the Secret Vatican Archives and several Mexican archives, in particular those of Mexico City, Morelia and Uruapan). I also developed a growing interest in visual sociology as an investigational instrument to apply in this field of study.
As one of my principal aims was that of putting the best work carried out in the ambit of the sociology of religion on the international map, I wrote the *Manuale di sociologia della religione* (Manual of the Sociology of Religion) and more recently the *Nuovo manuale di sociologia della religione* (New Manual of the Sociology of Religion) both in Italian and published by Borla, Rome. I also published translations of it in English (by Aldine de Gruyter, New York), in Spanish (now available in a new, improved edition, by Siglo XXI de Buenos Aires), Portuguese (by Paulus, Sao Paulo do Brasil), French (L’Harmattan, Paris) and Chinese (to date the only text of its kind in that language, by the Renmin University Press, Beijing). Another project carried out is a comparative international study involving three small “mountain communities” respectively in Italy (Orune, in Sardinia), Greece (Episkepsi, on the island of Corfu) and Mexico (Nahuatzen, in the State of Michoacán), which investigated the relations between community and solidarity. As far as productions of visual sociology are concerned I wish to mention, among others, the research films Rossocontinuo concerning the Red Christ of Cerignola, in the province of Foggia (Italy), and Las fiestas de san Luis, about the celebration of the patron saint of Nahuatzen in Mexico. Teaching is also a strong passion of mine, and my principal didactic aim is to make the theories and principle tools of sociology clear and intelligible.

Sociological knowledge cannot be, nor should it be, generic. Statements not based on empirical research and documentary evidence should not be made. Sociologists become operative actors in and assets to society if their work is as correct as possible from a scientific point of view (methodology, sampling, research tools etc.) and as free from prejudice and value judgements as can be. The best service sociologists can provide society with is their competence, based on procedural rigor, accuracy of exposition and interpretation, on the assumption that their readings of society will always be partial, provisional, and susceptible to further investigation and revision.

I graduated from the Faculty of Geography at Moscow State University where I studied economic and social geography. At that time there were no sociological faculties or departments in the universities, since sociology in the USSR for a long period was claimed as being a ‘bourgeois’ science. However during my university years there was a course on political economy (of course, Marxist) and a group of people interested in social sciences and research, so I started to think how to switch and affiliate myself closely to these studies. There was the only one institution at which I could study sociology as postgraduate student in the Academy of Sciences. A great change and a spirit of renewal for sociology for Russian sociologists appeared with Perestroika. New inspirations were brought forth by Professor Vladimir Yadov who became the leader of the institution at that time, and whose sociological way of thinking and open-minded style was the most attractive, since that time we worked together.
I am interested in relations between individuals and society, how private issues relate to wider social structures, and how social identities and new forms of solidarities emerge in societies under transformation. Comparison with other transforming countries gives many insights. By finding similarities and differences we may reveal something in our data that may give light to explanations of a particular phenomena in a particular country. Recently I was involved in a comparative study, which focused on the effects of transformation in Russia, in other eastern European countries and in China. In particular, we explored the roots and the nature of individualism in these so called ‘collectivist societies’.

Managing comparative projects with my colleagues from Poland, China and other countries is one point of that I am proud. Besides collecting comparable data and producing publications there one particular activity I am proud of: despite of lots of practical difficulties and formal obstacles working together in international teams produces an intellectual synergy from participants. This gives us a much deeper understanding of social phenomena studied.

I also enjoy teaching sociology students specialised in economics by offering them different perspectives to look at the world they live in. I take pleasure in persuading them to think critically and to engage in interdisciplinary studies. Some of my students have become interested in what I have taught them and have pursued further studies; this is very rewarding.

Critical thinking and a sociological imagination are the most powerful tools of sociologists when compared with other professions, especially our current times. The contemporary world needs us; however does not recognise this much. Knowledge within a frame of the dominant discourses is easy to consume, but there is always a space for critical sociology to undermine dominant discourse in the way it was created in order to reveal other alternatives and new social agendas.

Comparative social studies and experimental research designs can contribute to better understandings of causes and consequences of social phenomena. Sociological theories can help to discover hidden causes of what we see on surface of social reality.
I originally studied philosophy and political theory at the University of Lancaster, fascinated by the ways people communicate and reason: both how they can succeed in communicating in unlikely situations and how they often talk past, silence or ignore each other. Linguistic philosophy trained us to be attentive to the ways language is used; people in a single conversation might employ similar terms, ‘loneliness’, for example, or ‘community’, but mean very different things. This training made it possible to hear people’s talk and behaviour as fragments of complex structures of meaning on which they might or might not have reflected explicitly. It drew attention to gaps between the ways they suppose themselves to be arguing, and what they seem actually to be saying – not least in sociological texts, as I found when I began to read sociology at Oxford. I was puzzled by disconnects between what sociological works were reputed to contain, and what they actually communicated. The Italian sociologist Alessandro Pizzorno recommended I read Perelman’s *The New Rhetoric*, which seemed to me to accommodate the relationality of informal reasoning without systematically denigrating it. This approach led back to classical rhetorical studies and forward, not only to constructive sociological self-criticism, but also to ways of approaching intercultural and intergenerational understanding, and the ways people make sense of wisdom and the life course.

It seems to me that the sociality of human action and communication is not yet properly understood. Even people who research social construction, for example the social construction of ageing, often base their work on individualistic methodologies; this applies, too, to fields like social capital, where authors often try to discuss cultural phenomena without analyzing relationality. Sociological methods are frequently taught in a non-theoretical way, with little attention to problems involving meaning – either how to elicit and interpret it or how to gauge to what extent dominant patterns of meaning can be changed or resisted. But exploring the sociality of reasoning is crucial to enhance comprehension of how it can come to seem natural to see the world in ways that are destructive and irrational. On the other hand there are also social processes, often in non-mainstream or under-explored everyday settings that may appear non-rational but are in many ways constructive. Interrogating these issues affects key questions concerning human impacts on environments and landscapes; communication between people with different cultures – even when they are unaware of inhabiting different cultures, which can be tracked in the ways that power-structures flow in organisations; and the ways we build up our life-courses and relations between generations.

Tracking distortion in these patterns is fundamentally futile without analysing constructive forms of communication. For this reason I am particularly interested in the sociology and philosophy of wisdom and wise processes.

My research has always returned to the sociality of reasoning and argumentation, trying to see it in new ways: these include efforts to appreciate when it can be creative, innovative or reasonable despite, or because of, its shared nature: ‘reasoning together’, in classical terms. This focus has allowed me to combine the insights of classical rhetoric (a theory of communication that accommodates the relationality of thought) with the philosophy of informal reasoning and the sociology of the life course and its

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**Ricca Edmondson**
National University of Ireland, Galway, Republic of Ireland

*Why did you decide to become a sociologist?*

*In which area(s) of sociology are you most interested? Why?*

*Which of your professional activities (publications, research projects, teaching, etc.) are you proudest of? Why?*
contextuality in terms of culture and landscape. This combination supports a focus on exploring how people attribute meaning to their life-courses and each other. This focus, incorporating the effort to understand processes of deliberation that can be regarded as constructive or excellent, culminates in the project of reinterpreting processes involving wisdom. It allows us to understand wise processes in terms of social, interpersonal interaction.

I much enjoy incorporating research like this into teaching, learning from students as well as from people in other ethnographic encounters. Exploring wise reasoning processes that have been neglected or ignored is crucial if, for example, later stages of the life-course are to be rescued from denigration; ideas about interpersonal wisdom allow us to defend them as potentially productive and rewarding.

Human social behaviour is inherently relational and contextual, but this can be hard to appreciate in contemporary Western societies, particularly in their conventionally ‘mal-estream’ forms. Sociology can usefully help to resist the impact of atomistic, uncooperative practices and epistemologies, understanding more about how cultures work and how chains of power function within them.

Tracking the sociality of reasoning in this way is necessary to critique dominant views where they have destructive effects, particularly in their impacts on socio-political and economic structures and in areas where key, urgent problems face humankind: not least in relation to the environment, intercultural politics and the construction of the life course.

It's long ago! On a personal level I remember reading Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique*. It wasn’t exactly a work of sociology but it did reveal to me that the way the household is socially organised is not the way it has to be and that private miseries are not unconnected to social structures. This was reinforced by reading C. Wright Mills’ *Sociological Imagination*, which I valued for its good practical sense. I was from the start drawn to Marx, Marxism and critical theory – especially when I went to Columbia to do graduate studies and found myself caught up in the student movement against the war in Vietnam, against racism in the US and against most forms of authority! It took me a while but I loved reading this critical branch of sociology. I also had some vague notion that philosophy was too abstract, politics too dry and economics too technical, while sociology for me was just right. I came across sociology by chance in my undergraduate studies and found it was something I could work at. I always found it difficult to extract meaning out of experience and sociology provided a space in which I could justify doing this.

Robert Fine
University of Warwick, UK
My research topics have varied greatly but my core interests have remained fairly constant. My first published work was on issues of guilt and labelling and I retain a keen interest in how and why people and peoples are pathologised. At first, I pursued this through Goffman, Sartre, Genet, Foucault and labelling theory, while researching into the treatment of criminals and lunatics. This went with an interest in the rule of law and human rights, which seem to me crucial resources for treating people as human beings and not as objects. I was of course aware that the law can also be used to stigmatise others but I thought that current sociology, including Marxism, didn’t give enough space for thinking about rights. We were too quick to denounce ‘liberalism’ rather than build upon it. I was keen to develop these notions in the context of labour movements, British and South African, where solidarity was a great virtue but could at times triumph over any sense of individual right. More recently I have been following through similar themes in research on cosmopolitanism (taking the ‘ism’ out of it), antisemitism (and its relation to racism) and the sociology of human rights.

I am proud of my corpus of publications, though some of course are more interesting than others. I would like to have written more books and fewer articles! I value the chance to have taught undergraduates in courses on theory, deviancy, South Africa, sociology of law, and human rights. I have drawn pleasure from teaching masters students in labour studies and social and political thought. And perhaps not least I am proud of my many doctoral students, some of whom are now practicing researchers and academics. What pleases me most is not one or the other of these activities but rather holding them all together, sometimes under duress but usually in some kind of creative friction. You don’t mention the administrative activities we do as academics. I think some of my work in this area has been valuable – especially setting up the undergraduate degree in Law and Sociology, running the postgraduate degree in social and political thought, co-creating the social theory centre at Warwick, chairing the department of sociology for four productive years and helping to set up a centre for undergraduate research.

Sociologists can offer different skills to contemporary society based on their own interests and expertise. Where I would put the emphasis is on critical reflection about our understanding of society: the categories we use, the ways we think, the social structures we find ourselves confronted by, the problems we face and the actions we take to make the world a better place. What for me sociology can offer most is the time, the space, the skills and the motivation to think critically about our own society and other societies. It can enable us to look inwards on ourselves by looking outwards and seeing other ways of life. It can hold together our subjective capacity for reflection and our objective connection to the world. Hannah Arendt said that being able to ‘stop and think’ is important in the modern world. It seems to me that sociology is well-equipped help us do just that without simply turning in on ourselves.
I did not really decide to become a sociologist. I started my undergraduate studies in sociology and political science in order to gain general education until I realized what I wanted to do when I grew up. I did not really know much about sociology. Luckily, in my first year I had two amazing professors who lectured on culture and on stratification. Thanks to them I learned the language of sociology and kept wanting to learn more and more ever since.

I am most interested in the intersection of culture and inequality. It seems to me that these are the two big concepts in sociology, which in fact capture everything else and drive social life.

I am very happy when I see my work discussed in other people’s research. We never really know who reads our work, and when there is some evidence that someone actually read my papers and found them worth a reference – this is very gratifying.

The most important skills that I try to teach my students include the ability to take a subject, study it thoroughly by going into great detail, and finally to think about it critically. If students do that passionately, I think they can make a real contribution to society whatever they choose to do in the future.

I am currently a Guest Professor in the Department of Political Science, University of Aarhus, Denmark. I have been Senior Lecturer in the Department of Social and Policy Sciences, University of Bath, UK, until very recently and prior to that I have worked at various universities in Germany, where I live. So a European Association is indeed very helpful for me.

My first experience with ESA dates back to the ESA conference in 2001 in Helsinki, where I co-chaired (with Birgit Blättel-Mink) two sessions of the RN 19 (Sociology of Professions). Immediately, I felt ‘captured’ by the vibrant discussions and friendly atmosphere and the excellent opportunities for networking and knowledge exchange – and indeed even friendships – across Europe and beyond. Getting in touch with ESA had ‘sustainable’ effects: next to the publication of selected papers of the 2001 sessions in a special issue of an international journals, I have chaired the RN19 (Professions) for two terms and I am now a member of the ESA Executive for a second term; currently chairing the newly emerging Research Network Council. I have previously been responsible for organising ESA’s PhD Workshop and Summer School (with Elina Oinas).
My main research area is the healthcare sector with wide-ranging interests in health policy, the professions, and the organisation and governance of healthcare, including gender and feminist approaches as well as international comparative research. Most recent publications include among others a co-edited Special Issue of Current Sociology on health policy in international perspective (with Ellen Annandale, forthcoming in July 2012); The Palgrave Handbook of Gender and Healthcare, second edition (forthcoming in May 2012, with Ellen Annandale) and Rethinking Professions: International Directions in Healthcare (2008, Policy Press, with Mike Saks).

My interest is also to strengthen the voice of the social sciences in the current climate of cut backs in the public sector, including healthcare, and to create alternative agendas and future visions that are able to work against the submission of higher education to the market.

I always had an interest in things related to human relations, cultures et cetera. I originally took a degree in political science. When deciding the topic of my dissertation I realized I was especially interested in sociological issues and perspectives, and I have had no regrets since.

My main area of interest is at the intersection of environmental change, techno-science and political issues (conflicts, governance), which I try to address by combining theoretical and empirical work. It is difficult to say why one is particularly interested in one or some topics. I find this area especially challenging because one can see and investigate there some of the most important processes of transformation over the last decades. It is challenging also because this area overlaps a variety of disciplinary fields, within and beyond sociology and social sciences.

I think each of these areas offers reasons to be proud (or not proud) of oneself. They ask for partly different skills and resources. If I can talk in terms of sheer pleasure, I would say that seeing a work published (especially if it take a lot of sweat), listening to or reading from a student who has been able to take the best of what one has given and go beyond this, and drawing a research project or cleaning and smoothening a questionnaire or an interview protocol to make it an effective tool of inquiry, are pleasures of comparable worth.

I think that the pluralism and (self-)critical capacity of sociologists remain distinctive qualities, especially if compared with other social sciences that are characterized by stronger, dominant paradigms. Also the perspective of analysis proper of sociology is invaluable, because it keeps an eye simultaneously on individual action and interpersonal relations and collective phenomena, on culture and structure, on ideas.
and power. These features are especially precious today, that is in a historical moment of strong forms of ideological domination, where it becomes increasingly difficult to think differently, particularly when it comes to think of society as more than an aggregate of individuals connected by market mechanisms. For the same reason, getting funds and being relevant to actual policies is getting increasingly difficult. But we have to persist.

I wanted to make the world better, to make an impact to society. I had a great belief in the democracy, citizenship and open discussion as well as equality between genders. From the perspective of ‘my generation’ for a girl, coming from lousy suburb, it was also almost a duty to use all the education possibilities that Finland offered. I had other options of course (psychology, law, or mathematics), but the social sciences offered challenges and answered my curiosity in relation to questions like: How does society work? Why people keep on doing things that are harmful to them and to others? Could we know things more precisely? ... Yes, I was, and still am, curious, and discussion and understanding the world through the social sciences is interesting and multifaceted.

I am a professor of research methods, so I should be interested in methods. But honestly, I am interested in knowledge and knowing. Social epistemology is deep in my heart. But the questions about knowing demand always substance – only philosophers can believe that forms or logical models about knowledge tell something about actual knowing. Therefore I do research on interpersonal violence, emotions. Interpersonal violence is one of the biggest threats to everyday well-being. It breaks the everyday certainty and shows our vulnerability, as persons and as a society. Emotions as a phenomenon lie interestingly somewhere between feeling and knowing, they are recognised, interpreted, talked about, and still something other than rational ways of experiencing the world. They also are an example of the interactive space between subjects. But I am also interested in research methods, especially practices of doing, interpreting and using different kind of inquiry (i.e., surveys, web-surveys, etc.). This form of producing knowledge is used in everyday administration, planning and managing. Therefore it is a wonderful area in which to analyse power and governmentality.

I am proudest of my research projects as well as having the privilege to be involved in evoking the new research field in Finland and other Northern Countries. Finland is a country with high level of interpersonal, gendered violence. This ‘fact’ was known but considered a social problem or problem in need of scientific investigation. I was part of the group of scientists that, along with women’s organisations, prepared a research strategy and demanded research on this issue. We attained larger funding for this area of research and it is now an established research field. And I am still proud of my dissertation (Marked by Time and Space: Subjectivity, Knowledge and Agency), because it is a piece of theoretically inspired text and it is widely read even though it is basically analysing the practices of surveying.

Suvi Ronkainen
University of Lapland, Finland

Why did you decide to become a sociologist?

In which area(s) of sociology are you most interested? Why?

Which of your professional activities (publications, research projects, teaching, etc.) are you proudest of? Why?
Traditionally the sociologist offers a critical analysis, but we can do also better than that. I think that sociologists can understand and analyse how knowledge is produced, used and exploited in society. They cannot, however, tell what the truth is, but they can take part in social discussion and make distinctions between more or less fallacious claims, and uncover the politics of knowledge. Knowledge itself is a political issue but here I am referring to Sandra Harding who claims that there are not only vested interests in knowing but also in not knowing. What can be called knowledge is discursively formed but – more than this self-evident claim – the sociologist should be more critical in analysing what kind of interests are part of the world that are hidden behind everyday discourses that claim to know about something. Economic discourses are a beautiful target for this kind of analysis.

Originally I had planned another career (as a teenager it took a long time before I even knew about sociology), but in the process I got interested in anthropology. However, I assumed job chances would be better with sociology and just as fun. So I decided dreams work best when you can pay your bills. I also wanted to be involved in social change and realised that sociological research does make an impact. My master thesis (more correctly the old more extensive Norwegian “hovedfag”) paved way to change the neutral, but gender biased tax law for women, in particular, who worked in private companies with spouses as co-owners. As long as we live gendered lives, gender-neutral laws have gendered effects, so removing structural barriers is a good start. It was an enjoyable experience to see that my choice to become a sociologist was a good choice. For my first job I choose a one-year job as a lower-paid research assistant over a well-paid permanent job in one of the Ministries showing that sociologists are willing to take risks. It did pay off: It took me to my research interests.

My interest in distribution of welfare materialised in the first national study of fringe benefits in private companies and by time took me to a long research collaboration with Mzumbe University in Tanzania, East-Africa where we (master- and PhD students included) have lately explored the welfare benefits in private companies in Dar es Salaam. In parallel with this I have been doing ethnographic research on Asian business in East-Africa. These experiences have been good for methodological reflections such as “Could there be other ways of getting at local contexts in non-western settings?” and “If so, how?” including Cicero’s “Cui bono?” Colonialism still keeps creeping into cross-cultural research by a complex mix of mediators perpetuating the western hegemony in research into “neo-” rather than “post-colonialism”.

Apart from the many publications, this work has also resulted in a number of talks at western and African universities (Tanzania, Malawi, South-Africa, Sudan, etc.) to discuss the assumption of western universalism and contextual alternatives. To also read Asian, African and Arab sociological works has been good for reflecting upon sociological knowledge production, and crucially if sociology aims at social change, not only outside Europe, but also in a culturally more complex Europe. Put simply, there is never a dull day with sociology!

Anne Ryen
Department of Sociology and Social Work, University of Agder, Norway

Why did you decide to become a sociologist?
In which area(s) of sociology are you most interested? Why?
How can we single out these activities so closely linked? The successful efforts to generate external funding for research leads to my data upon which my publications are built. Eventually I bring them into my teaching. This is the classic circle. But, in our sector things do not exist until they are published. In life outside the bureaucratic files, pride and joy are never fixed. It feels very good to see my work published and even better when in references, but it also feels very good when my students tell me that coming to my office for supervision makes them happy and filled with energy to go on. In just the way, their good feedback on my teaching gives me the same boost. We are never too old for compliments!

My students tell me that the best way to get the intellectual message over is when I also draw on my own research in particular when it comes to complex matters, so using my own research works well to invite my audience on-board. The ability to tell a story and to go on from there still works. The circle is back, but as an untidy, unpredictable and at times an overwhelming and lovely mess.

As a previous chair of RN20 Qualitative Research I will point to the sociological skills “how to find out”. C. Wright Mills’ “The sociological imagination” calls for our curiosity – what is it that we see out there - what is this phenomenon? C. Wright Mills (who died 50 years ago) argues that the sociological imagination makes us see the individual and the structure (or history and biography) and the relations between the two. To recognise this task and this promise is the mark of the classic social analyst. That, he claims, is to possess the sociological imagination.

To sum up, the sociological analyst needs to possess particular skills to explore observations compared to lay people – a matter of great concern particularly in qualitative research. If we employ the same knowledge as the social actors we are to study, we recognise and explore the everyday structures by using the same resources or the common-sense social categories in everyday language of those we study. This circular cognitive process increases the risk of reproduction (and it is why ethnomethodologists differentiate between topic and resource). This way, our sociological imagination offers to produce knowledge of great value to improve our contemporary society. This is our offer!
I had a student position at the University of Basel’s medical school, but looking around, with the Vietnam War and exploitation of the developing countries, I decided that societies need more doctors than individuals.

I am interested in sociological theory: for example, in issues concerning the host societies of autonomous subjects. I am particularly attracted now by the Scottish Enlightenment, because the debates then were straightforward and still sound fresh today. I earn most of my research funding by conducting research on addiction, social control and governance. This also is fascinating because it is an area in which the classical split between culture and society does not apply.

I published a book in 2009 titled *The Saturated Society*. That project sums up many of my concrete researches and also my theoretical reflections. It will be a source inspiration to me for a long time to come. I hope someone else finds a few noteworthy points in it too.

Please see my President’s message (page 2, this issue). We need to tackle upfront the new issues involved being a society, particularly in Europe. However that cannot be our limit – Europe is, after all, part of the world!

Initially for a very simple reason. While studying economics I became increasingly disappointed by economists’ habit, to remove all interesting problems in so called “general conditions”, thus protecting economic theory against reality. Later on I discovered more general reasons for studying sociology and doing sociological research: Collecting information on people’s thinking and acting within society, hence understanding social change and, in particular, overcoming fruitless moralistic debates.

My main subjects of research are (1) the sociology of social security, (2) political sociology including theory of crises and (3) the sociological theory of society. The first mentioned seems to me important for the simple reason that social security is a basic need of people in all kinds of modern societies. Only with slight exaggeration one might state that there is no sociology without insights into social security. Concerning my second interest, political sociology is a good thing as it allows researchers to deal with acute problems while making interdisciplinary use of different social scientific disciplines such as economics, political science and history.

It’s hard to say. I really love teaching, both in small seminars and giving lectures. But I am afraid to say that my favourite occupation is producing research-based publications. That’s what remains (perhaps) at the end of the day.
First of all, sociology offers unusual perspectives on many different aspects of society. Or the other way around, sociology help to disturb all kinds of routines. At first sight this might look superfluous, but in fact it provides society with the potential to be innovative. In particular at times of massive and rapid social change it is obvious that this is a crucial contribution to society.

When I began my studies in Freiburg, Germany, I intended to study a number of freely chosen courses for one year at a “Humboldtian” university before registering for a degree programme leading towards a profession. The latter programme on my list was either mathematics or medicine and psychology. I even did an internship at a hospital and I completed courses in mathematics. But after my Humboldtian year, I could not resist continuing on to study the subjects that I had chosen out of pure interest from the course catalogue: sociology, philosophy, history and psychology with sociology as a major. I was more than fascinated by this discipline. It opened my eyes. It taught a mode of thinking that was far beyond what I had learnt elsewhere. That interest has persisted until today.

Sociology invites us to think deeply about ourselves under the conditions of modernity. But unlike philosophy, it additionally offers the intellectual tools for analysing the conditions that underlie our self-understanding. It is a great form of thought. Everyone should have the chance to get intellectually in touch with it.

Because my earliest studies introduced me via the tradition of critical theory, Hegel, Marx, later Weber, phenomenology and systems theory, to attempts at gaining a sociological understanding of contemporary society, I fell in love with looking through the lenses of social theory right from the beginning. Theory raises the big questions, for example, the transformation of sovereignty in the current global era. It provides guidance in the face of sociology’s internal fragmentation. It pervades the discipline by providing conceptual tools for sociological research. The good thing with theory is that it emerges everywhere in sociology. Each area in sociology needs it and each fact calls for theory. We all draw on theory for building our arguments. Nevertheless, I am also concerned with the sociology of law, studied the digital revolution, and pursued Bourdieu-style research projects on inequality and cultural taste.

Here I would first like to say that I am not completely satisfied with the development of sociology as a field to a field of careers, no longer concerned about the progress and impact of its intellectual enterprise, which motivated me so much. Science has become a game where we compete globally against our colleagues for scarce resources. This is one of the reasons that I enjoy our ESA activities that are off the individual track of promoting our fate as scholarly “entrepreneurial selves”.

Frank Welz
Innsbruck University, Austria
However, making a small contribution to the intellectual realm that we all share is probably the most satisfying success in science. I have been lucky that my book *Critique of the Life-world*, applying historical epistemology to phenomenology, resulted in a new view to see things, that slowly seems to be developing a lasting impact on the general understanding of interpretive sociology. In teaching, I introduced two things. First, in the nineties I used the Internet to create a virtual classroom including a class held at my home university and a class in New Delhi. Second, I converted this curriculum into a non-virtual, much bigger, very successful and truly global “Global Studies” Master’s programme, which still exists.

The latter project taught me that the individual skills in demand on the job market are less knowledge of facts on society but generic competencies. It has been surprising to me that studies make a difference, such as sociology, that are open, sometimes diffuse and particularly challenging if they include studying abroad under the most different intellectual and practical circumstances. In this regard, sociologists are at the top of the league compared to graduates of other subjects. They are up to date, flexible, familiar with different modes of thinking, and know how to talk! Considering the discipline, the impact of sociology and other social sciences, particularly economics, cannot be underrated. Again, it is less the concrete results of particular studies that make the difference but the frames underlying the discourses in society, which are deeply “sociological” even if, of course, not directly introduced by us.

**ESA Research Network 32 – Political Sociology**

ESA’s Research Network on Political Sociology (RN32) is pleased to announce its second mid-term conference, to be held at the University of Milan (Italy), 30.11-01.12.2012:

**Political Participation and Beyond Multi-level dynamics of inclusion/exclusion in times of crisis**

Political participation is a founding theme of political sociology. In broadest terms, it refers to all forms and activities through which individuals or collectives express opinions and also exert influence on decisions that are of common concern. While concerned with apathy, abstention and “exit”, political sociology has also described and categorized a broad and ever-changing repertoire of citizen (and non citizen) voice, i.e. activism and formal or informal involvement whether individual/collective, manifest/latent, institutionalized/unconventional, direct/mediated, online/offline. The aim of this conference is to explore the extended scope of political participation in relation to transnational government arrangements and processes. Within this broad theme, all crucial concepts of political sociology are embraced.

**Abstract submission:** Both panel proposals and individual paper proposals are encouraged. To encourage participation by a broad range of early career researchers and experienced academics, there is no registration fee.

**Deadline:** The deadline for panel and paper proposals has been extended to Tuesday 15 May 2012. Please submit abstracts of max 200 words to: m32mtc2012@socpol.unimi.it The conference committee will notify applicants by 15 June 2012.

**Conference venue and organization:**
Department of Social and Political Studies, University of Milan (Italy).

**Further information is available at:**
http://www.socpol.unimi.it/rm32
The 6th International Conference of the Albanian Institute of Sociology and the foundation of the Balkan Sociological Forum

The 6th International Conference of the Albanian Institute of Sociology (AIS) – the official name of the Albanian Sociological Association – was held from 21st to 22nd November 2011 in Tirana, Albania.

The Central Theme of the conference was “Education in turbulent times: The Albanian case in a European and global context”. Education is considered as a kind of “universal solution” for social problems and private concerns and the main question is: how the developments of our time affect education. Regarding Albania, two decades of Post-Communist transition represent in itself a “turbulent time” and drastic transformations are made in the field of education. But quantitative changes have generated significant problems in terms of quality issues. A national survey by AIS (2010; n=1364), highlights the following issues: (1) the quality of education not only is considered a “social problem”, but even ranks first in the hierarchy of social problems at the moment; (2) the public concern index in regard to poor levels of education, is higher than the public concern index for many other social problems; (3) a number of other social issues are perceived to have a direct, or indirect connections with the schools and teachers; (4) referring to public expectations, quality education is also considered as key to solving other social problems such as poverty, etc.; (5) teaching is gradually becoming “an abandoned profession” (only 0.8 percent of 2010 graduates have selected “teaching” as first preference for university studies); (6) education is likely to enter into a cycle with detrimental consequences for the future of Albania and the prospect of its European integration.

The Organisers of this conference were: the Albanian Institute of Sociology, the Albanian University and the Mediterranean University of Albania. There were 228 participants from 20 countries and alongside a plenary session; two Semi Plenary Sessions, a Special Session, 22 thematic sessions and a 4th General Assembly of Albanian Institute of Sociology were organized.

The 6th International Conference of the Albanian Institute of Sociology was held on the 5th anniversary of its foundation (2006-2011). This shows that the founding of the Albanian Institute of Sociology was a new beginning for the development of sociology and other social sciences in Albania. Since its Embryonic Meeting in 2006 the Albanian Institute of Sociology is grown exponentially: from 35 founding members, today there are 7-8 times more. In its First Annual Conference (2007) there were only 12 authors/speakers. In its Sixth Conference there were about 230.

As far as Albania goes, we have broken every record. The collective project of the Albanian Institute of Sociology is to develop sociology and the social sciences in a country without a long tradition in this field. Looking back at the second half of the 20th century, sociology was considered hostile to the leading ideology. The fight against sociology was also considered part of the so-called class struggle. A passage from the book The Currents of Political and Social thought in Albania a “prestigious” book of the Albanian Academy of Science of 1985, written just four years before the collapse of the Berlin Wall, is enough to illustrate this fact. It referred to sociology as, and I quote: “The French sociologist August Comte is known as the first Creator of the Bourgeois Sociology. The positivist sociology of Comte emerged as a reaction against Marxism, to reconcile the contradictions between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie class, to sabotage the war of the classes that was strengthening...”

In this book and others of that time, sociology is considered bourgeois, reactionary, racist, and anti-humane and even an imperialist science. Even up until 1990, all sociologists of the world were considered dangerous; every school of thought was prohibited, except a local “Albanian version” of Marxism. No one referred to sociology as a science; sociology was totally excluded from the university curricula; there were no exchanges with the sociological community of the world and so on.

In this context, we can better understand the extraordinary efforts of those who have promoted sociology in Albania, including the Albanian Institute of Sociology and its members. Despite these difficulties, sociology exists now, even in Albania.

The next Annual AIS Conference will be held in Vlora, Albania, on Albania’s 100th Anniversary of Independence (Vlora, Albania, 28th November 1912-2012). The AIS has again invited scholars from around the world to join together and discuss some of the most critical themes of our time, regarding “identity, image and social cohesion in our time of interdependence”.

Photo: Nomad Kat (Flickr)
The Balkan Sociological Forum is founded

In parallel with the 6th annual Conference of Albanian Institute of Sociology and with its initiative, on 22nd of November 2011, the Balkan Sociological Forum (BSF) was founded in Tirana, Albania. BSF is an association of collective members, comprising of the national sociological associations of the Balkan countries, regional associations inside these countries, research institutions, and universities or their faculties/departments. BSF is opened for the organizations and institutions of sociologists and other social sciences.

The main objectives of BSF are: to establish a permanent cooperation between the current and future national associations in Balkan countries, as well as between the Universities of the region; to organize the Annual Conferences of BSF – by turn in each country; to promote activities and to exchange: programmes, professors, students, experiences, and responsibilities.

The elected President of the Balkan Sociological Forum (2011-2012) is Leke Sokoli – the founder and the present Executive Director of the Albanian Institute of Sociology. Svetla Koleva, the President of Bulgarian Sociological Association, was elected as Vice-President. Following the 1st BSF Annual Conference “Sociology and social sciences in the Balkans: Experiences, Problems and Challenges” (Tirana, Albania), thanks to the engagement of Bulgarian Sociological Association, the 2nd BSF Annual Conference “Close but Unknown Neighbours: Balkan Sociological Perspectives” will be held in Sofia, Bulgaria from the 16th to 17th November 2012. This conference will be organized by the Bulgarian Sociological Association, the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (Institute for the Study of Societies and Knowledge), Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski, Plovdiv University Paisii Hilendarski and the New Bulgarian University.

NEWS

ESA’s forthcoming meeting of the National Associations

The upcoming meeting of ESA’s National Associations will take place in Paris on the 25th October 2012. It can be a turning point for research in the social sciences. The top representatives of European scientific institutions will join with us to discuss matters of scientific policy. The meeting will include the following representatives of scientific institutions/bodies:

• Robert-Jan SMITS, Director-General of European Commission, Directorate General for; Innovation & Science;
• Thomas Koenig, Scientific Associate to the President of the European Research Council;
• Wolfgang Eppenschwandtner, Executive Coordinator of the Initiative for Science in Europe; and
• Paul Boyle, President of Science Europe.

The meeting will also include interventions by Jennifer Platt, Vice President of the International Sociological Association and Tahar Labib, the Secretary General of the Arab Sociological Association.

For further information, please contact Roberto Cipriani, Chair of ESA’s National Associations Council: rcipriani@uniroma3.it
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