
‘Conference Business’ as Usual? An Open Letter to the ESA

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As participants of the 12th Conference of the European Sociological Association (ESA), we were disappointed by the discrepancy between the main topic and the actual event. The ESA conference is an important academic meeting that influences European sociology and consequently we feel that it is important to open discussion about its purpose, format, and desirable impacts, issues that seem to have not been questioned in recent debate.

We are well aware that the ESA conference is embedded in the much larger structures of the academic world of which it represents just one small part. Despite this, we believe it is important not to be cynical and accept the view that when things are done in a certain way they cannot be changed. Some scholars are uncomfortable with mass events like the ESA conference, for reasons that we shall outline below. They react by avoiding them, but that will only serve to deepen cleavages within European sociology. We have therefore decided not to remain silent. We hope that the comments and proposals we present in this letter can help make the ESA conferences better and more consistent with the issues they address.

The introduction in the conference programme refers to sociology’s theoretical and empirical inquiry into the world around us, the sociological imagination, and, most important, to the responsibility that the global sociological community has to confront the exponential increase in social inequality. If one of the main challenges of contemporary sociology is grasping the depth and the extraordinary acceleration of processes of social change, we need to question the tools we use when we attempt to do so. Calls to alter the way we do things always seem naïve, idealistic, or radical, and often run up against the limits of our imagination. Still, it is not enough to resort to just the usual process of getting things done. In order to study the ‘new conditions’ properly we need new approaches and this extends to much wider practices in academia. If our society is currently facing profound and sweeping changes, we should respond not only by adjusting our ideas but also by rethinking the ways in which we organise and do things.

Inequality was declared as the main topic of the conference, but the actual event in no way differed from the (unfortunately) standard style of conference

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tourism, which is profoundly exclusive in design and serves to affirm and deepen inequalities instead of addressing them. This fact raises some important questions: what are the real ambitions of this event? Should we be content with an event that sets self-presentation and networking as its objectives that are fulfilled through participants' sponsored travel to an interesting city and ostentatious social events?

We would like to point out three aspects of the ESA conference event that we found particularly inconsistent with its theme.

1. Exclusivity

The prohibitive pricing of the ESA conference excluded people from smaller institutions, poor countries, and early career scholars with limited research budgets from attending. Consequently, these people were excluded from both presenting their work and networking. Attendance was based on the ability to obtain funds for it.

The conference's main social event was held at one of the most luxurious places on the Vltava River. The entrance fee to this event alone was another 40 EUR, which for many people was not affordable. If we take seriously the challenge of confronting issues of inequality, we have to start with ourselves. A less exclusive location for the dinner and more inclusive conditions for taking part (e.g. more affordable fees) would be more conducive to fostering equal and informal discussions and would create a better space in which to actually address the issue of inequality—an issue that will certainly remain on sociology's agenda, regardless of the topic of the concrete ESA conference.

2. The ivory tower

As well as the academic exclusivity of the event, which served to reproduce the hierarchy that exists within the sociological field, the event did not actively engage with the public. Today, when migration is a pressing topic in Europe and several presentations addressed it explicitly, it is disappointing that at least the outcomes of the conference debates on migration were not presented as a press release for the Czech and international media. The conference was a self-contained event whose only connection to the public sphere was one interview with Zygmunt Bauman in a Czech newspaper and a short interview with Gurinder K. Bhambra on Czech public television. There could have been more media interviews with conference participants and speakers, as the media are an indisputable tool by which to bring about change.

There is also a bigger question: does not the very nature of inequality require that it be tackled by means of dialogue with the public? If we want to offer society sociological knowledge and ideas to counter fatalism and apathy while

helping find ways towards more desirable developments in the future, we cannot simply engage in exchanges behind closed doors. We have to actively consider the public impact, whether that means an impulse for policymakers, the empowerment of various stakeholders, or simply the raising of public awareness about important issues.

The conference could open up more to the public by holding lectures, discussions, seminars, round tables, and workshops that welcome the public, politicians, or stakeholders. The great accumulation of international resources could be also used to create various educational events for youth. The exchange can productively work both ways—for example, working groups or panels could be formed in which sociologists, political actors, NGO representatives, and people concerned with particular social issues can discuss these issues together.

While we do not aim to dilute the academic exchange the ESA conference offers into events for the general public, we feel that a more systematic focus on what is beyond academia would be advantageous. The absence of sessions for the general public and the very limited outcome shared with the media raise important questions. How can we attain the level of understanding and awareness we aspire to? Is the closed exchange of academic knowledge what we want European sociology to be?

3. Social responsibility

The need to implement socially responsible measures seems to have been recognised as the lunch boxes were prepared by migrant women from Ethnocatering. However, the question is why this conscientious approach to the event's organisation was not carried further, because the coffee breaks were serviced by a regular catering business, the hefty conference programme and all the conference papers were printed on regular, not recycled, paper, and there was a large amount of merchandise given to participants that was truly unnecessary. The 'socially responsible T-shirts' almost seemed a joke in this setting. True, these are seemingly minor issues, but re-evaluating the approach that was taken would be consistent with addressing the issues that we have deemed so important from an academic point of view: unsustainability, inequality, and exclusion.

We feel that the practice of outsourcing the organisation of the event to an international conference provider should not be so automatically adhered to just because it's easier to do so and it's always been done that way. We need at the very least to start a discussion of how the standard approaches to organising this conference, while they make it easier to bring it about, are in their effect exclusionary and at odds with some of the principles of equality and accessibility that sociology concerns itself with, and consequently these approaches actually prevent the event from fulfilling its potential, both in terms of participation and the thoroughness with which it explores its themes.

As well as re-evaluating the basic organisational framework of the event, there are all sorts of individual steps that can be taken, such as including more socially responsible enterprises in the practical organisation of the event (for example, to provide the coffee breaks or place for the main social event) and addressing the wider issue of consumption: printing less and on recycled paper, limiting the free merchandise, providing fair trade coffee, and so forth. There is also the question of leftover food: this year the lunches were given out for free and unfinished food from the coffee breaks was not thrown away but given to a local independent community centre. We would like to highlight this as a good practice and hope it will continue in the coming years too and hope that, while the idea was born out of the local organiser's friendly relations with the centre in Prague, it is a practice that can be picked up and continued at future ESA events.

Although the discrepancy between the topic of the ESA conference and the actual event was greatest in 2015, previous ESA events have been organised in a very similar way, so we see our comments as pertaining to systemic issues. We call for a discussion within the executive bodies of the ESA and within the sociological community as a whole in the hope that there is an alternative.