

SPECIAL COMMUNICATIONS

POLISH SOCIOLOGIST AT ESA CONGRESS



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“SOCIAL RELATIONS IN TURBULENT TIMES”. COMENTS ON SOCIOLOGY OF RECENT CRISES¹

The slogan put into the title of this essay was the theme of the Geneva 2011 European Conference of Sociology. It seems to us that this slogan very well reflected the lasting global economic crisis (or, perhaps, the recent stage of a longer and more profound crisis²), which led (as we are writing) at least one member-state of the European Union to the verge of bankruptcy. Since May 2011, during several months, the youth protests (“indignation movement”) lasted, and they have not been fully and deeply interpreted sociologically (although there are interesting and inspiring works published by social scientists, they are rather their impressions than scholarly studies)³. Very serious political crisis in northern Africa continues, what has significant implications for Western Europe, with which that region has had strong relations for thousands years. Moreover, Western European (as well as American) politics can be considered one of the causes of this African crisis and

¹ This essay presents the comments on the 10th Conference of the European Sociological Association, Geneva 7–10 September 2011.

² On 15th September 2008 a huge American bank Lehman Brothers collapsed, causing a panic on American stock exchange. In 2009, the banking system of Iceland collapsed, what brought significant international ramifications.

³ The protests of the “indignant” took place in 950 cities on all continents on 15 October 2011.

the West will have to live with its economic, political and cultural consequences. According to Analia Torres, President of the European Sociological Association or ESA (until the Geneva Conference) and Sandro Cattacin, Chair of the Local Organizing Committee, the theme of the meeting embraced in an obvious way the most pressing sociological questions of the day: economic and social crisis challenges both sociological skills and sociologists' imagination. "Since its beginnings as a scientific discipline, sociology has sought answers to the sociological questions that arise in different social contexts. In turbulent times like those we are living in, when social inequalities tend to deepen and social cohesion is threatened, research agendas are frequently redefined and theories must be adapted to cope with new ideas and new social realities. Sociological gatherings like conferences serve to challenge our conceptual resources and our capacity to understand and explain these social trends"⁴. Although "the times" are nearly always "turbulent", most probably we are witnessing a particular accumulation of symptoms just now. The atmosphere of the conference was, undoubtedly, crisislike, sometimes catastrophic.

European Sociological Association emerged unofficially during the regular congress of the Austrian Sociological Association in Graz in 1987. Three years later, during the World Congress of Sociology in Madrid, the First European Conference of Sociology (then, to be held in Vienna in 1992) was discussed and prepared. 661 participants came from 33 countries. Three years later, during the conference in Budapest, the ESA was formally established. The association deals with broadly understood social problems of European societies, but its active members come from various continents (nearly 16% of the participants of the Geneva Conference were non-European scholars). In Geneva, they presented papers in all kinds of sessions, from the plenary to the working groups.

We are of the opinion that the Association has always been deeply interested in the timely, but crucial, issues, what was very well reflected in slogans or themes of individual conferences. The beginning years of the organization was marked by great transformations in Europe: the post-Communist transition in Central and Eastern Europe, but also the dynamics of the European Union, the slow decline of old divisions and, probably faster, emergence of the new ones. Let us look at the themes of the former conferences: *Sociological Perspectives on a Changing Europe*, Vienna 1992; *European Societies: Fusion or Fission*, Budapest 1995; *20th Century Europe: Inclusions/Exclusions*, Essex 1997; *Will Europe Work?*, Amsterdam 1999; *Visions and Divisions: Challenges to European Sociology*, Helsinki 2001; *Ageing*

⁴ A. Torres, S. Cattacin, *Welcome to Geneva*, ESA 10th Conference Social Relations in Turbulent Times, Programme Book, p. 7.

Societies, New Sociology, Murcia 2003; *Rethinking Inequalities*, Toruń 2005; *Conflict, Citizenship and Civil Society*, Glasgow 2007⁵; *European Society or European Societies?*, Lisbon 2009. We believe that these themes reflect the above mentioned fact that for the scholars studying Europe the old geopolitical divisions lose their significance and the new, common problems and tensions within the whole continent, tied to the global problems, gain the importance. Perhaps in this, paradoxical way, the new, common Europe emerges.

In this account, we shall refer only to the substantive issues, putting aside the organizational matters⁶. The substantive content of the main sessions – plenary and semi-plenary – will be particularly interesting for us. These events gave the largest Conference audiences a chance to learn what the eminent and recognized scholars (not necessarily Europeans) had to say about the recent global social issues. We shall not be able to be equally detailed about the special sessions, “meet the author” sessions, not to mention the working groups. What will be the most important for us are the symptoms of the turbulences of our times in the opinion of the major speakers and the authors of the discussed books.

The first, opening plenary session was a debate on “social Europe under pressure”. Martin Kohli spoke about the challenges to the social model of intergenerational contract. The nature of this contract lies in the fact that the active generations support the generations which are not yet – or already not – active. The demographic transition, economic globalization as well as the changing patterns of work and family life all question the suitability of the social model invented in the 19th century. According to Kohli, in the 21st century, the class structure and not the age structure becomes again the deciding factor, determining the life

⁵ “Kultura i Edukacja” quarterly published a review by Magdalena Bergman: *Conflict and Society: 7th Congress of the European Sociological Association 3–6 September 2007*, “Kultura i Edukacja” 2008, No. 5, Vol. 69, pp. 136–139.

⁶ We would like, though, to underline two internal issues of the Association as well as one issue related to the way the conference was prepared. Pekka Sulkuinen from Finland was elected the President at the Geneva Conference. He has been active in the Association for years. The next conference is due in Torino, Italy, in 2013. A huge number of participants of the Geneva Conference, who intended to present a paper (2364 papers) led to some organizational “innovations”, astonishing sometimes, and always causing technical problems. From among four “plenary session”, two were organized at the same time. There were twelve “semi-plenary” sessions. There were also twelve “special session”, and one of them was organized simultaneously with the “meet the author” sessions. Special sessions took place simultaneously with sessions of some research streams and research networks. Obviously, we were not able to participate in all these events. In some cases, we asked our colleagues to send us their opinions. We appreciate this help. There were some discrepancies between the printed program and the real state of affairs and when we were aware of this situation, we underline this fact in this essay.

chances of the Europeans. Jacqueline O'Reilly analyzed the variety of challenges to the "social Europe". In her opinion, the recent intergenerational, ethnic and gender conflicts cause tensions in three scales: micro, macro (within the nation-states) and international. The speaker was interested in the diversification of symptoms of these tensions within both the European and non-European societies. How do the institutions regulating these tensions change? What is the nature of the new social class – "precariat"? The third presentation (by John Urry) of this session became later particularly often discussed. The speaker focused on the "peaking and social turbulences". The paper was interpreted as a "warning forecast", even if the author was of the opinion that it was a very realistic forecast. According to Urry, it is hardly possible that we can very soon increase production of fossil fuels (in particular oil), that even if we have new, realistic and profitable technologies, decades are necessary to implement them, that the consumption of energy constantly increases, and therefore the global energy crisis is coming. This crisis will seriously limit the social spatial mobility (the transportation of people and goods) and will, in the near future, lead to the fuel wars. There was no formal debate immediately following these papers, but many participants were later returning to them in their own papers and in the formal and informal discussions. "Flexibility" and "interdependency" were the most important concepts used during this plenary session.

Next two, parallel, plenary sessions, were devoted to a) life trajectories in turbulent times and b) sociology for turbulent times: views from around the world.

The leitmotif of the first one was the influence of the above mentioned recent turbulences on the life of individuals. Hannah Brückner spoke of gender inequalities in the life course and focused on work, health and the family life. Her presentation was a very good synthesis of the most significant threads in the fields of sociology of sex and gender, interpreted in the context of contemporary global problems. Dale Dannerfer concentrated on several types of vulnerability and their relation to the postindustrial life course. These moments of vulnerability have, on the one hand, a cultural background, and on the other hand have a material character and are closely related to the social division of labour and resources. Vulnerability occurs all the time, but during the economic turbulences its perception can be particularly negative. At the same time, individuals seldom are aware of the real determinants of the worsening of their social situation. As a consequence, people can give up the attempts to cope with the problems individually, on their own. The following effects are the outbursts of collective discontent. Dannefer sees here an important challenge for sociologists who should, in his opinion, not only start the interdisciplinary research on significant for people social transformations,

but also help in their understanding, in order to prevent the above mentioned mass outbursts. He believes that it is necessary to take advantage of sociological imagination which would help to see the interrelations between various elements of the dynamics of social reality. Hans-Peter Blossfeld devoted his presentation to globalization, the rising uncertainty and the vulnerable – transition from youth to adulthood in modern societies. These societies, according to the author, are integral elements of the process of globalization in the developed world. He paid attention to the fact that not all people experience in the equal way the growing risk in the everyday life. Lower classes as well as the youth are particularly vulnerable (as we remember, these groups were the collective actors of most of the protests in European and Arab countries during this period of time). These two groups handle the uncertainty using various strategies, but most often brushing aside the moment of taking responsibility for their own life, and of starting family. Blossfeld was of the opinion that these people do have real expectations addressed to the state institutions, which have the obligation to support the young people and to give them the foundations of the stable functioning on the job market. All of these plenary presentations were very well integrated with the atmosphere of the conference. However, they did not inspire any controversies and the final discussion was not very interesting.

The speakers of the second of these sessions, on global issues, were scholars not only from Europe, but also from Lebanon and the US. Michael Burawoy, President of the International Sociological Association, a British-American sociologist, served as the official discussant. Sari Hanafi spoke on the major collective actors of the recent turbulences in the Arab world. In his opinion, these actors are mostly a/ well educated, socially dispersed young people, linked, however, to various political organizations and trade unions, and b/ the working class members, also partly linked to the trade unions. Hanafi stressed the significance of the second group, very often neglected by analysts. According to the speaker, we witness in the Arab world new, self-reflecting social movements, realizing the class politics. Ching Kwan Lee discussed the recent situation in China. It is a puzzle to many commentators, she said, how it is possible that during the period of fast economic growth but also many social protests, the state authorities succeed in keeping the situation stable, under control? Using the Gramscian concept of hegemony and her own empirical material, the author showed how the social protests of factory workers, peasants and house owners, are mitigated by the low-ranking representatives of the state administration. Stability is founded on the balance between coercion and the acceptance of the state hegemony. Goran Therborn looked, from the global perspective, at the social forces labelled recently as the "indignation movement".

He was interested in the symptoms of the deficit of traditional democracy in sovereign nation-states, which became highly visible during the financial and economic crises of a number of European countries and in the above mentioned movement, active in Greece and Spain. Therborn linked this movement to the “Arab Spring”. Like other speakers, he proposed the return to the class analysis, with the special focus on the new, globalized middle class. Comments by Burawoy deserve our attention as well. He was sceptical toward all presentations. In his opinion, concepts like exploitation and exclusion, are more important than the categories used by the speakers. He believed that recently the exclusion became socially even more widespread and devastating than exploitation. In his opinion, there is no hegemonic balance in China and he predicted social outbursts in this country to come soon. Analyzes of the “Arab Spring”, said Burawoy, rarely outline the probable future scenarios. Class analyzes, in general supported by him, usually are not precise enough in the world of increasing marginalization of many groups. Also the latter approaches, at least until now, are weak as future scenarios.

The last plenary session of this conference debated the future of capitalism (the same topic was also discussed by the Research Network on Economic Sociology and by speakers of some semi-plenary and special sessions). Sylvia Walby analyzed various forms of today’s capitalism and reflected on perspectives of each of them to become dominant in the globalizing world. She debated the crises of capitalisms: fiscal, ecological (like Urry, climate changes and the increasing discrepancy between the fuel peak and the fuel demand) and the crisis related to the growing violence in its various forms. She was interested in the consequences of these crises to the women question and in the actual and potential reactions of the European Union to these crises. In the contemporary world, and particularly in Europe, she was looking for ideologies which could be useful in the attempts to overcome these crises and for social forces which could lead us to the new phases of development. John Solomos focused on race and racism in a global context. Recently, the awareness of ethnic differentiation is growing, and we witness the increasing difficulties in the continuation of multicultural politics. Cultural pluralism as well as (related to racism) marginalization of many groups are global phenomena having numerous negative consequences for the social peace. The speaker postulated concentration on research on the global poverty, migration of asylum seekers and refugees, politicization of ethnicity, the role of social media for the making of these phenomena public, but also for their very shape. Unfortunately, discussion after these rich presentations was not long nor intensive. The end of the Conference was coming too fast.

The papers we have discussed above have not limited themselves to the pure description. The authors intended to show long trends of climate, economy, culture

and structure changes and they put the analyzed phenomena into these frames. The speakers were interested in the usefulness of traditional social ideas (like those of Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, Karl Polanyi, Alain Touraine) for interpretation of the contemporary world.

We shall devote much less space and attention to the semi-plenary and special sessions, concentrating in this account on their interest in the "turbulent times". This focus was visible not only in the titles but also in the content of presented papers. As we were not able to participate in most of these sessions, the analysis of discussions is not possible here. Out of twelve semi-plenary sessions, eight referred directly (in their titles and in the content of debates) to the general theme of the Conference. They were rarely very coherent sessions, however. How was, then, the Conference theme translated into more detailed topics? The sessions dealt with relations between the personal and the social; the world of values, professions and the labour; threat and risk to the environment; science, theory and method; European welfare and education; culture, arts and religion; citizenship; media and consumption. Moreover, the "turbulent times" were also conceptualized in other frames and categories, like the recent economic crisis and its symptoms in the fiscal crisis, financial meltdown, turbulence in labour markets and gender, situation of young people in the world in global recession. Slightly outside of this dominant problematic, but actually in close relation to it, were sessions devoted to migration and the Bologna process in European higher education. Among the well-known scholars we can name here Richard Münch and Hubert Knoblauch.

As an example, we shall concentrate on the problems discussed at one of the semi-plenary sessions. Its title was "Young people and the global recession" and the papers were given by Ken Roberts and Carmen Leccardi. Nearly all of the mentioned above issues were analyzed here. In the first presentation, increasing tensions between the young and the older generations were discussed. According to Roberts, entering the adulthood has always been difficult, but nowadays, for the first time after the Second World War, the former continuous improvement in living standards became slowed down and the children do not live better than their parents. This situation is a consequence of assumptions, made about thirty years ago, that the higher education determines to a large extent individual economic success (and stimulates economy). The (Western) world does not develop as fast as it was predicted, what causes growing tensions between generations and within them (ethnic pluralism within the nation-states is another factor mentioned by the author) as well as radical changes in the life style (like widespread activity of women on the job market, low fertility rate, life based on the bank credit, late entering the adulthood). The new situation should enforce a novel definition of "develop-

ment”, until now having been understood nearly only in economic terms. Now, the young people hope only in the simple survival on the job market and not in the financial success. The second paper, “Young people, generations and biographical time. Facing up to an uncertain future”, was concentrated on the impact of the “turbulent times” on the life course. Leccardi, like Roberts, comparing two generations – “baby-boomers” born in the 1960s and “millennials” (contemporary young people) – directed our attention to the intergenerational difference in the perception of the present and the future. In her opinion, the young adults, unlike their parent, not only have no future plans (and future is a space of constantly growing uncertainty) but also rarely refer to this conceptual category in their life course. The category of future was replaced by the notion of “extended present”, or short (lasting only a few years) projects. As a consequence of these conceptual differences, misunderstandings and tensions between the two generations arise. The gender issue was strongly visible in this presentation – the speaker was of the opinion that for the young women the “turbulent times” are even more difficult than for the young men, because the biological clock of the former group splits to an increasing degree with “social clock”, what makes it difficult for them to coordinate the occupational roles with the family roles (and this is supposed to be the major reason of the decreasing population growth).

After the presentations, the audience (mostly young scholars) engaged in a very interesting discussion with two dominant threads. The first concerned sociology as a scholarly discipline. It should react to the transformations of the way the social world is constructed by individuals by a retreat from the structural approach, interested in the future forecasts, into the broadly understood cultural approach, interested in interpretations of the contemporary dynamics of social world. One of the means of this kind of understanding should be the life course perspective, like the one presented by Leccardi. The second widely discussed issue was the difference between the perception of the role of the state institutions by different generations. Discussants debated how to explain the decreasing (in relation to the former generations) involvement of young citizens of the Western Europe in politics for the involvement into (broadly understood) market. They argued that the dissatisfaction with one’s own life situation causes a mental separation of the young people from the state, and the condition of their involvement in other spheres of social life is a stable job situation and a sense of economic security which is hardly provided by the contemporary states.

There were twelve special sessions during the conference. We shall arrange them in a different way than the semi-plenaries. Four of them dealt with education, three – with the contemporary capitalism, two – with gender relations as a topic of con-

temporary sociology, and two – with sociology as such⁷. One of the latter sessions was devoted to the Francophone sociology, and the other to the relationist sociology. Among the well known speakers of the special sessions we can name Laurent Thevenot, Neil Fligstein, Margaret S. Archer, Pierpaolo Donati, Julia Szalai, Robert Miller and Luc Boltanski. As an example, we shall concentrate on the content of the special session no 8, devoted to the relationist sociology. Margaret Archer, a very respected co-founder of “critical realism”, one of the leading *agency* theoreticians, was the main speaker. She was analyzing the reflexivity as a relational phenomenon, in its emergence, working and consequences. Based on the findings of her own decade-long empirical research project on the “internal conversation”, she debated varieties of reflexivity, an issue having been also widely discussed by scholars like Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, Zygmunt Bauman or Scott Lash. Archer questioned the homogeneity of reflexivity, according to her wrongly attributed to it by authors mentioned above. She put forward her own (sociological and not psychological, what she strongly underlined) typology of reflexivity. In her opinion, one can distinguish its four types: communicative, autonomous, metareflexive and fractured. Discussion after this paper was very interesting and sometimes turbulent, but unfortunately could not last long. Another speaker, Pierpaolo Donati, was introduced to the audience as a “founder of relational sociology”. We shall not debate with this introduction, although numerous important works in this area were published before the major book of this Italian author came out. The paper was an attempt to prove that everything in the social world is a relation. The presentation was not received warmly by the audience, whose many members stressed that substantively speaking, all good classic sociology is relational, even if it does not use the term. Andrea Maccarini gave a paper on something different than the program announced. His topic was the “Engaging in time: the reflexivity in turbulent life course”. The author was interested in temporal dimension of identity (in particular in times of instability), dynamics of biographies, deinstitutionalization of individual lives, breakdown of the clear purposefulness of human biographies. In our opinion, discussion was not particularly interesting.

There were nine “meet the author” (or editor/s) sessions, and including a special session “Gender meets sociology” – ten. Let us look at the topics of the books selected for this kind of events. The special session on gender was extremely well attended since it discussed a book that analyzed gender issues as seen by classics of social thought, from Max Weber to Bruno Latour, and Luc Boltanski, undoubtedly a star of today’s sociology, served as one of discussants. Other sessions of this

⁷ One “special session” was in fact a “meet the author” event.

type were devoted to: a new textbook of methodology by David Silverman, a work of Bill Bytherway on the significance of age for social research, a work of Eric Widmer on family configurations, a book of John Solomos on transnational families, a book of Bente Halkier on food medialized in medialized everyday lives; as well as edited collections on social capital and sport governance in Europe and on sociology of the European Union. We shall present here slightly more broadly two remaining books. One of them, edited by Dario Spini, was devoted to social vulnerability in Europe. It is interesting, in our opinion, that in a session of the Research Network on Social Theory we listened to very important papers on this matter, the significance of which seems to be growing in sociology. And the last book was the second, enlarged and revised edition of the textbook on social theory in the twentieth century and beyond, authored by Patrick Baert and Filipe Carreira da Silva. We shall describe here an important and very well attended “meet the author” session (chaired by Christoph Maeder) which was a discussion of the new, enlarged version of edited by David Silverman textbook, “Qualitative research. Theory, method and practice”. Comments were delivered by Thomas Eberle and Anna Ryen who addressed the issues of ethnographic research and the ethics in qualitative research. After Silverman’s own presentation of the book, the debate started. It concentrated on the author’s view that the contemporary textbook on qualitative methods in social sciences is to limit itself to the presentation of possibilities of the usage and interpretations of empirical material. Researchers’ task is to formulate their own methodology in such a way that they reach the nature of the problem in question. To sum up this part of our account – in these sessions the general theme of the Conference was not reflected particularly well. No wonder. The books under consideration came out mostly in 2010, and were written and prepared earlier. Even if the general theme of the Conference was conceptualized in 2009, it was too late for the books, but not too late for the speakers in regular paper sessions who could react to the current events and processes.

The last kind of sessions to be discussed here were those organized by individual Research Networks and Research Streams (sometimes double, joint sessions) of the ESA. We shall not analyze them thoroughly but instead we shall try to arrange them in such a way that will stress the relation of their content to the general theme of the Conference. Among the 33 research networks which met in Geneva, many were directly linked to the issue of “turbulent times”. As examples, we can name the networks “Aging in Europe” (papers mostly on the quality of life in older age, formal and informal care and older people, intergenerational relations); “Critical political economy” (papers on economic crisis, non-Western models of capitalism); “Disaster and social crisis” (papers on the global threat of terrorism, natural disasters and

the methods to cope with them and with the increasing risk of various kinds); "Economic sociology research network" and "Sociology of social policy and social welfare" (many papers on the current economic crisis, but also the gender and ethnic inequalities on the job market); "Environment and society" (social threats caused by natural disasters, as well as their political and societal consequences); "Gender relations on the labour market and the welfare state" (papers on the specific situation of women on this market but also on problems with coordination of maternity with occupational career); "Health and healthcare in Europe in challenging and uncertain times" (papers on healthcare inequalities and new civilizational illnesses, like depression); "Sociology of risk and uncertainty" (papers on working under conditions of uncertainty and of the formation of the "precarious class", but also on the contemporary moral panics and risk management); "Social movements" and "Southern European societies" (papers on the recent protests, not only in Europe); "Sociology of migration" (papers on the dynamics of emigration during the economic crisis and on the impact of economic mobility on global social inequalities). As we can clearly see, the problems that dominated in the papers were global economic crisis, increasing social inequalities, outbursts of social discontent, intergenerational tensions and the risk caused by the climate changes. Other research networks were in a less direct way interested in the theme of the "turbulent times", but this theme was present both in papers and in discussions.

Among the 21 research streams which organized sessions during the conference, we would like to stress "Economic elites in turbulent times" (papers on the impact of the economic crisis on the operation of various interest groups) and "Culture, politics and conflicts" (papers on new religious and ethnic conflicts and on unequal access to democratic rights). Other research streams concentrated mostly on ethnic and cultural differentiation in individual European countries, on migration (but also the maritime sociology), and were in fact more loosely linked to the main theme of the Conference.

Let us summarize the accomplishments of the conference as we see it now (most probably, most of the papers will come out in 2012 or 2013 in articles and collections). In our opinion, the conference took up a very timely and significant, scholarly and socially, topic of "turbulent times", in which we have lived for several years. The conference debated on this broad issue both on a very general (in plenary and semi-plenary sessions) and on very specific and empirical levels (in sessions of research networks and research streams). In our opinion it is very important that European sociologists devoted this very large conference to the problems so crucial not only for Europe but also globally, and which can bring far-reaching and unpredictable consequences.