

REVIEW

THE 14TH CONFERENCE OF THE EUROPEAN SOCIOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION – WITH PERSONAL INSIGHTS

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The European Sociological Association Conference 2019, held August 20 – 23 in Manchester, was the fourteenth in the organization's 27-year history. Interestingly enough, the first two conferences actually took place in our region with a significant Hungarian contribution: first in Vienna in 1992, then – as the only exception to the biannual rule, after three years – in Budapest in 1995. (The host institution of that conference happened to be the predecessor of the Corvinus University of Budapest.)

Recalling the past is not an end in itself, as, based on browsing the documents of past conferences, the focal points have not changed fundamentally over the past two and a half decades. Just a few of the mainstream themes today include the social impact of environmental problems, gender studies, social inequalities, migration processes, and the emergence of “new” minorities: all topics that have not lost their relevance in the last few decades, and have even been incorporated into everyday social discourse.

However, alongside the relatively unchanged core topics, the organizational background, the range, and the number of participants have changed over time. The number of attendees has increased five to six times in past decades: attendance has continued to grow, with the initial 600 participants having recently reached over 3,000. The circle of participating countries has tripled, obviously not independently of the restructuring (typically, fragmentation) of the continent's internal borders.

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Of course, pointing to the relative stasis of the basic themes, the “more-similar-than-different” principle is a kind of simplification. Whilst in addition to discussing evergreen topics, sociology immediately reflects changes and new trends in societies. This interpretation represents the fusion of traditional and modern sociological perspectives. This fusion was also manifested in the program structure of the conference. Conveniently, Manchester, the host city of the conference, exemplifies such a kind of dual principle from a slightly different angle.

The venue of the conference was emblematic for many reasons. Being a well-known metropolis of the origin of capitalism, Manchester has inspired such monumental thinkers as Tocqueville, Marx, Engels, and Weber. The city has even become eponymous, with “Manchesterism” implying the principles of free trade and laissez-faire capitalism. The city symbol of a worker bee – which is visually communicated across the city – serves as a constant reminder of the industrial past of Manchester. The conference’s host institutions were Manchester Metropolitan University and The University of Manchester. Both of them have a prominent past and an internationally renowned present. The universities provided high quality facilities and services as well as an accessible location for the conference. Due to intensive preparations for the forthcoming Manchester Pride Festival, the city was surrounded by a special atmosphere at the time of the conference.

To stay up to date politically, economically, and socially again: Brexit and the sharp polemics it is accompanied by, as well as the vivid and rapidly changing political climate, are attracting citizens’ attention to the UK from around the world – with special regard to scientists and analysts. Accordingly, similarly to the last conference in Greece, through the choice of the host country the European Sociological Association reflected the globally relevant and to some extent shocking changes. The choice of the title of the conference (“Europe and Beyond: Boundaries, Barriers and Belonging”) proved the same.

Applying a general approach, the opening Plenaries addressed problems of decolonization, creolization, inter-imperiality, as well as democracy and populism and what comes after it. Manuela Boatcă argued that by transcending ahistorical universals, Europe should be defined as Otherwise, or as a creolized place. The concept of “Europe Otherwise” refers to rethinking and widening the interpretation of Europe, taking into account present European colonial possessions in the Atlantic and Caribbean Sea. Then, Michel Wieviorka argued that “populism” is a mythical and controversial political formula or code created in imaginary discourse – and when this code is unscrambled it reveals such terms as boundaries, barriers, nationalism, authoritarianism, and extremism. The second Plenary was organized around fears and hopes in relation to social

mobility, cultural inclusion, and housing by discussing lessons both from the US and Europe at the city and national level. The closing Plenary focused on decolonial feminism in the cleaning/caring industry, as well as migrant and refugee mobility in the Mediterranean. Plenaries were chaired by the president of the European Sociological Association, Sue Scott, the Conference Committee chair, Marta Soller-Gallart, and the Local Organizing Committee chair, Gary Pollock. All plenaries took place in one of Manchester's representative buildings called The Bridgewater Hall.

Some Semi-Plenaries reflected the same problems the Plenaries had already touched upon (populism, nationalism, feminism, refugees) but most of them introduced special themes, perspectives and perceptions such as digital labor capitalism, ageing, symbolic boundaries, social mobilizations, the sociology of risks, and uncertainty in the epoch of the Anthropocene.

In addition to Plenaries and Semi-Plenaries, the conference's backbone was the ordinary research sessions provided by the Research Networks of the European Sociological Association and the Joint Sessions organized in collaboration with them. There were 37 of the former and 24 of the latter, sometimes involving several Research Networks. In addition, there were Research Stream sessions (close to a dozen) as well. Research Streams are permanently or temporarily organized around specific sociological topics and/or projects, in a looser framework than Research Networks. Altogether, around 700 sessions were scheduled at the conference, including four presentations per session on average.

A special form of session at the conference was the so-called Midday Special. These dealt with the most relevant topics for sociology as a discipline and provided useful practical information about sociologists' daily work. They included a presentation about the European Research Council, the current issues and opportunities for research funding, evaluations of research results and the work of the researcher, big data and its influence on sociology, as well as the national and international impact of sociological research.

The impressively wide array of Research Networks and their presentations can be classified into several clusters – some of them resonating with the topics of the Plenaries and Semi-Plenaries. Some examples of distinguished thematic clusters included the sociology of ageing Europe complemented by childhood, youth and families, the short- and long-term consequences of different types of crises, (environmental) sustainability, gender and sexuality, social movements, migration, and ethnic relations. Another cluster integrated classical sociological branches such as the sociology of culture, consumption, health, education, communication and media, employment, religion, science and technology; along with urban, economic, or political sociology. The next clusters of papers focused on methodology and social theory.

Beyond the above-mentioned central issues, some interesting and at first glance peripheral but no less relevant approaches were also incorporated into the Research Networks' agenda: biographical perspectives on European societies, the sociology of emotions, global, transnational and cosmopolitan sociology, society and sports.

Research Streams, in the format of somewhat looser, self-organized groups, were dedicated to research topics outside the present mainstream. Perhaps they appeared to cover some marginal themes at first sight, but their importance was not questionable. For instance: gestational surrogacy, multilocality and family life, future studies, the sociology of celebration, the sociology of knowledge, and the sociology of law, etc.

The conference program gives an overview not only of current European trends, but also Hungarian research directions. This "diagnosis" is however not perfect, since certain selection mechanisms perhaps make it slightly biased. One of these biases was that Hungarian presenters were typically from the young- and middle-aged generation, while older ones were almost absent in Manchester. It is also worth mentioning that among the Hungarian presenters, the staff of the former Hungarian Academy of Sciences' research institutes were over-represented. The Corvinus University of Budapest – sometimes in combination with the Hungarian Academy of Sciences – was also often a sending institution. The relative under-representation of the Hungarian university sector cannot be passed over either. The University of Debrecen was a refreshing exception to this rule, and was present with a surprising number of lecturers at the event.

Regarding the choice of topics of the Hungarians, most of the Research Networks had at least one Hungarian presenter. Based on these, and considering the above-described selection effects, Hungarian researchers focused on three main areas: the sociology of education, political sociology, and the sociology of families and intimate lives. Hungarians were also noticeably well represented in the sessions on gender studies and social policy and welfare, and presented several papers at these.

Concerning the thematic concepts of the Hungarian papers presented at the conference, the lack or under-representation of topics may also be a kind of indicator. Some social problems of interest in Western Europe seem to be of less interest to domestic researchers. For example, aging appeared in only one paper presentation (Dóra Gabriel's study on case work in Austria). Interestingly, the topic of migration appeared indirectly and sporadically, and not always within the Migration Research Network but within other topics. Examples include Valér Veres's research on the values and prejudices of young people, and lectures by Ildikó Zakariás and Margit Feischmidt on the situation of Hungarian immigrants in Germany.

Concerning the Visegrád countries, Slovakia was relatively inactive in terms of conference participation, whilst the presence of the Polish, Czech, and Hungarian attendants was rather balanced (if we accept that number of presentations is also a kind of indicator in this case). The main research focus was family and intimate lives in each Visegrád country. Besides this sphere, there were significant differences in theme selections of Visegrád presenters. The Polish research interest seemed to be the most diversified and sophisticated – their sociologists were active in almost every Research Network, including in topics the Hungarians neglected. For instance: migration; work, employment, and industrial relations; biographical perspectives; the sociology of transformation: East and West; and the sociology of health and illness. A common Polish-Czech segment of research topics – in contrast to those of Hungary – was ageing and social movements. It is worth mentioning that the Polish sociologist community was quite active and showed initiative in specialized Research Streams in general, and in law- and knowledge-related ones in particular.

Surprisingly, despite the variety and diversity of conference topics, some socially relevant and crucial themes were practically missing, or at least underrepresented. To list only two examples, there was no Research Network nor Research Stream that explicitly dealt with classical problems such as deviance, including the sociology of crime, suicide, alcoholism, or other addictions. Moreover, macro-level stratification paradigms were also underrepresented. (This was not the case in the International Sociological Association's Research Committees, however.) Just to mention one more example, besides a Midday Special session, big data as an approach and method would have deserved more attention at the conference.

In browsing the conference program, one could surely find some interfaces, new insights, or alternative theoretical or methodological approaches connected to one's own research projects. Good practices regarding family education in Spain and a complex evaluation of a parenthood support program in South Italy were the contents of two papers that exemplified tactile input and added value to personal ongoing research efforts.

As we have seen, the program was incredibly rich, mapping the current status and state-of-the-art of the science, demonstrating its high degree of – and sometimes over – specialization. It should be noted that, due the magnitude of the event, the transparency and comprehensiveness of the program was quite limited, posing serious dilemmas and challenges for participants, including the authors of these lines. As a main rule, the organizational structure (involving dozens of presentations in parallel) forced over-professionalism, as it left little room for exploring terra incognita; i.e., completely different sub-fields of the science. From a personal perspective, research on various aspects of music

(opera, classical music, ballet, rap, etc., as well as the consumption of national and international music and their boundaries), food and digitalization (“meat porn,” food blogging, etc.), research on “excessive” bodies and students of restricted growth were such territories.

Moreover, the following question arises: if the selection of research themes, theoretical approaches, and methodology of a science are so diverse, where are the *boundaries*? Based on what conditions can a science be considered coherent and uniform? What about intersections, interdisciplinarity, the colonization of certain topics by other sciences, and the birth of independent sciences? Following the aforementioned logic, in the field of deviance the sociology of crime has quasi disappeared and practically dissolved into criminology. In this scenario sociology may lose more and more parts, reshaping the image of our science. Such a conference counteracts this trend and serves to strengthen the European sociologist identity. The next opportunity for more of this will be offered in Barcelona two years hence.