

## **Presidential Address**

### **Sociology for Turbulent Times**

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M. Charles Beer, State Councillor  
M. Pierre Maudet, Mayor of Genève,  
M. Jean Dominique Vassalli, Rector of the University of Genève,  
Ms. Mathilde Bourrier, Director of the Sociology Department

Dear guests, colleagues and friends

First of all, on ESA's behalf, I would like to thank Sandro Cattacin, Patricia Naegeli, Morgan Piguet and all the authorities at the University of Genève, the Swiss Sociological Association and all the members of the LOC, for the excellent work they have been doing in organizing this huge conference. I really hope that their intensive and detailed preparation allows us to have good and productive debates as well as nice moments to relax and enjoy good relationships.

The record number of attendance, as well as the record number of ESA members achieved in this conference exceeded all our expectations. It is very good for ESA, and for European sociologists, that the crisis we are living did not detain them to come. And I am very glad because since 2009 I have been saying that this is the biggest conference ever in ESA's life. It was in Lisbon, and it's even better in Genève. Thank you very much.

In this address I will approach the topic of the conference by discussing, first, these turbulent times in European societies, secondly, I will consider texts and books from previous conferences to identify lines of continuity in our sociological reflections and finally I will try to sketch how European sociologists can contribute to intervening and reinforcing citizenship on our globalized world.

*Social Relations in Turbulent Times*, the theme decided in 2009 for our conference, remains today a very adequate choice. But we could not foresee that turbulence would reach the incredible events we are witnessing, especially since the beginning of the year 2011.

In Europe, at the economic level we are facing what I dare to term a financial war. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century we had in Europe two devastating world wars and then a “cold” one; in the 21<sup>st</sup> century we are facing a financial and economical war. The pressure from financial markets and rating agencies over countries looks like a military invasion. Touching country after country, beginning, of course, with the most fragile economies and reaching afterwards all the others. The outcome will be, as several predict, the end of the Euro and with it of years of building the European experiment.

At the political level, neo-liberal global dominance tends to invade all spheres – from markets, to state, to universities - and to submit politics and nation-states to its logic. At the same time the effect of the crisis at the social level entails several contra-reactions and violent protests.

And yet, the expression **Turbulent times** could be applied to several historical periods since the Second World War, or even further back.

**“In what period have so many people been so totally exposed at so fast a pace to such earthquakes of change?”**

Is this a recent statement? No, it is not. This is a phrase among others alike written by Wright Mills in 1959 in his famous book *Sociological Imagination*.

We tend to consider the period we are living in as the most challenging, the most upsetting and problematic. But, the paragraph I am quoting ends with a reference to the real threat of a “third world war”. So serious turbulence then was also on the air.

Coming back to Europe and to the beginning of the 90s, when ESA was launched, we should not forget that at the same time we were welcoming new countries, we were witnessing the tragic disintegration of former Yugoslavia with its horrifying ethnic conflicts and even genocide. So war and destruction were daily realities, in some nations, within what we call our borders.

Of course, the perception of fear, instability or insecurity depends a lot on the specific contexts where you are living. Here and now, in

Genève, the crisis of the Euro seems distant – and yet it affected our Conference because of the rise of the Swiss Crown against the Euro.

So, what makes the present turbulence really specific?

We could talk about **speed**. Since we started preparing the conference in 2009 a lot of important apparently sudden and unexpected events were considered a focus of analysis for sociologists and hence eventually topics to be addressed now: the bailout of Greece and then Ireland and Portugal, in what seemed to many a clear attack on the Euro; the revolts against dictatorships in Northern Africa; the Utoya killings in Norway and the clear face of racism and Nazism; more recently, the violent riots in England.

These quick changes may surprise us but as sociologists know, these are only the visible faces of **social and economical processes** that are operating in less visible ways and that we usually try to uncover. We write about them, publish about them and discuss them in our work.

That's why I am going to return to some of the topics chosen by ESA for our conferences and our book series. This exercise of memory is also very useful allowing us to draw some lines of continuity and rupture.

But before that I would like to answer the question raised above. What makes the present turbulence really specific?

I argue that there are four aspects making these moments problematic and challenging, especially, for Europe.

1) **Never before**, since the creation of the European Union and the integration of the central and eastern European countries, did we have such a strong feeling of disruption, disintegration and of the possibility of real backlash. Was it conceivable, for some of us at least, that our old currencies could be back?

2) **Never before**, did we feel so directly the destructive power of financial markets and financial capital attacking nations-states. Politicians are captured by financial agents dictating the supposedly “laws of the market” while mainly looking after profit and their best interest.

3) **Never before did** we see European political leaders, facing the crisis with the absence of any collective notion of European solidarity or a long-term view. Political decisions, when taken, have only a national narrow horizon in mind and “wishful thinking” that a global and European crisis will not touch “their ” nation or “their” re-election.

4) And if since the 80s we were witnessing the erosion of social protection and the Welfare States, **never before** did we see such cuts in social and public expenditure, meaning that we are left with a pale image of what was the European Social Model. Cuts and rising taxes that will leave little hope for any economic growth, leading to a vicious circle to more unemployment and recession.

### **How did we get here?**

ESA’s Conferences reflect quite clearly what sociologists have been writing and saying about the main trends and events at European and global level.

**European Societies: Fusion or Fission?** was the theme of ESA’s II conference held in Budapest in 1995. These contradictory trends were captured and analyzed for that period.

What tendencies of **fusion** and **integration** or of **fission** and **disruption** can we identify since then?

Three parallel trends can be acknowledged on the **economic**, **political** and **social** plans sometimes intertwining, sometimes coexisting in contradiction and conflict.

**The first trend is the financial and economic one.** The dominance of financial capital in a globalized world, and its mobility in contemporary capitalism, is the most powerful force controlling politics, regions and nation states. In the last twenty years the power of multinational corporations and the rise of other regions of the world with cheaper labour has put more strain on European countries.

These pressures led to processes of fission and disintegration all through the 90s. Economic recession and globalization, technological changes and the restructuring of European economies – with reduced capacity for absorbing European less qualified workforce, like Wolfgang Streeck emphasizes (Streeck, 2001: 21) - increased unemployment and poverty and the difficulties in sustaining social security and welfare states.

The crisis of the welfare state was very well analyzed both in 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> ESA's conferences. The topic of the latest one **Will Europe Work?**, in 1999, concerned the European unification process as well as the future of “work societies”. As Kholi and Novak stated, already then, from the three factors of the “integration of Europe – free trade, political protection for key industries and a welfare state to cushion the deprived – only the first seems to have survived. The European Social model has come under pressure (Kholi and Novack, 2001: 6)”.

And, they argue, without the buffer of social protection **“Conflicts are likely to fundamentalize themselves under conditions of exclusion, economic deprivation and moral devaluation** (Kholi and Novack, 2001: 10)”.

Ten years after, that is exactly what we are witnessing: serious conflicts, several forms of protest and even violent riots.

In 2007, in our 8<sup>th</sup> Conference, Nicos Mouzelis addressing the changes introduced by the extraordinary mobility of capital stresses **“it explains the state's incapacity to control capital movements and to redistribute the wealth produced”** (Mouzelis, 2010: 27). Any attempt, he continues, to control these movements imply massive flights of capital to countries where working conditions are primitive. The consequence is the imbalance between **capital and work** – reminding us of the period of the early industrialisation – with large sectors of the population with job loss or job insecurity.

**These flashes from the past** show a line of continuity with the crisis of 2008: a foreseeable step further in the direction of the dominance of financial capitalism. Its consequences were especially hard for some fragile economies and societies within Europe. And as this force is the one dragging everything around it will probably be also at the heart of the disintegration of the EU if no other strong force opposes to it.

And at the political level: what trends of **integration and fusion** and of **fission and rupture** can we observe?

The creation of the European Union is an important mark of **integration**. As Goran Therborn has pointed out, in 1995 at ESA's Second Conference, the creation of the EU represents a significant political effort to build a body of norms and institutions pursuing human rights, combating nationalism or any other "ism" and ideas of a nation's supremacy. And these political norms and efforts were not nourished by any ancient traditions - religious or others - but basically by the lessons learned with World War II, the Holocaust and its gas chambers (Therborn, 1995: 25).

**Forces of integration**, on the system level, were also represented by the convergence of the Central and Eastern European societies "to the model of political democracy and market economy found in the western countries" (1999, Boje Steenbergen and Walby).

The greater participation of women in the labor market and public life in all European societies is also considered as a relevant sign of **integration**. Their participation, apart from the relevance for their own citizenship, has been vital to the growth of rates of activity in Europe. It represents a great contribution for the problem of sustainability of social security systems. Tensions on this field, however, also arise because most of the "family care work" rests still also on their shoulders.

It is also necessary to recognize the positive results of the Europeanization of social policies. Some countries really benefited from the adoption of more favourable policies and also from selling their products and technologies in the huge common market built in

the meanwhile. Europe is now a real space of circulation of people, commerce and of knowledge.

Other signs of **integration** are clearly seen on scientific research field. Framework Programs, though limited in their goals or design, contributed to the creation of researchers' networks and cooperation that had no parallel before.

Beck and Delanty, in 2006 also stress the **interpenetration** of European Societies, considering it a result of the intensive exchanges involved in a common currency, migration, tourism and the building of common institutions. In their view, Europeanization is also linked strongly to an idea of democratization – as political democracy was a requirement for the integration of southern as well as central and Eastern countries.

But interpenetration or democratization does not mean **homogeneity** (Beck and Delanty, 2006: 22). Only a **cosmopolitan Europe** can prevail over the idea of a “great Europe” by celebrating national diversity as a main feature of Europe as well as blurring the idea of “otherness”.

Of course, these perspectives about Europe and its institutions represent only a stand among others in the European public arena. What it is possible to observe is a constant debate about what Europe is and what it should be with conflictive or different perspectives. The tendency that seems to be winning in Europe is the neo-liberal recipe insisting on the importance of deregulation, which seems to be the prevailing force that commands the European's Commission documents since the white paper (Boje, Steenbergen and Walby, 1999: 6).

So the coalition of interests and political ideas inspiring the founders of the European Union were at stake years later. That is why Goran Therborn writes in 2005: “The social conception of Europe, once a widely shared part of European political identity (...) is being ideologically abandoned (...)”.

Forces of **fission** or **disintegration** on the political plan were also identified, contributing to raise obstacles on integration processes in the last twenty years in European societies.

In Central and Eastern countries, the time for celebration and enthusiasm for the fall of barriers and the collapse from within of the “communist” regimes was followed by a period of a feeling of unfulfilled expectations. Unemployment, the erosion of the previous social protection systems in these countries and the rise of social inequalities led to the deterioration in standards of living and an increase in social insecurity. These experiences should not be forgotten when analyzing present Arab revolts.

Fifteen years later, the situation has, of course, changed a lot reminding us also of the need to account for the differences among these societies prior and during the communism period as several colleagues have been drawing to our attention for (Ilnert, 1999: 235).

Signs of **fission** and **disintegration** were also observed in Western Europe namely around ethnic conflicts, racism, nationalism and social exclusion. All through the 90s “a growth of racism and ethnic conflicts” strongly connected to new forms of immigration, has extended to the Scandinavian countries – “which had previously thought that they were too tolerant for this to occur” (Boje, Steenbergen and Walby, 1999: 5).

Does this remind us anything? 17 years later we had in Utoya the horrified expression of this latent racism.

**A third driving trend** has marked civil society and social and political agendas in Europe and at the global level. Civic and political action for real citizenship and against cuts and unemployment, precarious jobs, prevailing immigration policies, the degradation of the planet has been observed. All through the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century several forms of protest were acted also against the changes brought about by global anti-terrorist politics after 9-11.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other activists using Internet promote concerted actions all through the globe managing several ways to be heard. Other forms of less organised and generally more violent protest were observed in the majority of the European countries.

Two main features should be stressed here. On the one hand, the imbalance of power between civic players and multinational



corporations is obviously as large as the relation between capital and work previous observed by Mouzelis (2010).

And secondly, some of the protests have been more explosions of rage against obviously striking inequalities than organized actions with clear goals. Showing the fission between excluded and included and reminding us again of the period of early industrialisation with explosion and action of what were called then the “dangerous classes”.

Discussions about the meaning of some of these movements and other social changes were the main theme on our 8<sup>th</sup> Conference in 2007 given origin to a book where Giovanna Procacci, Donatella Della Porta, Nicos Mouzelis, Margaret Archer and Jeffrey Alexander among many other colleagues contributed with their texts.

**This quick tour** around Europe and its problems is not difficult to conclude.

First, and using the theme of our second conference, we are living now a period where forces of disintegration are clearly winning the course. And in order to drive them back a new leadership and a new way of dealing with political, social and economical problems are absolutely necessary. As Ulrich Beck wrote in February 2011 in a text entitled **Cooperate or Fail! The way out to the Euro Crisis**<sup>1</sup> European countries are condemned to cooperate and even to make a **Declaration of Interdependence**, stating: “anyone who wants national stability and security (social, financial and environmental) must practice European solidarity”.

Secondly, this exercise of memory using ESA sociologist’s production in several conferences as well as in books published in our book series shows how rich and productive has been our collective work. Even though it reveals only a tiny part of the European sociologists work, this sample shows that the main issues and topics of our societies have been clearly addressed by our scholars. And more than diagnosis, we have been able to point out ways to deal with some of the European problems.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://dissentmagazine.org/online.php?id=444> consulted on 22 August 2011

Since the beginning of the 90s, sociologists stressed the need to “build (in Europe) a social infrastructure” (Boje, Steenbergen and Walby, 1999: 6).

This would increase integration and fight the fission tendencies already observed. However, the solutions presented by European leaders by that time were – as they are now - “deregulation”. We are witnessing today the results of these dominant practices.

Sociologists and social scientists had an important role contributing with their work to public policies and the building of the European social model, and thus of the European Union.

But we need more than that now.

It is urgent that we refine our analysis of the present crisis, mapping our sources of ignorance, and to give only an example, opening the black box of the financial markets.

It is urgent that we disseminate our results – most of the time denouncing the errors of social, economical and political neo-liberal choices and recipes.

It is urgent that we connect our European efforts with other colleagues around the world using clearly strategies of Public and Global Sociology as Michael Burawoy and our colleagues from ISA have been doing.

Against the financial war and the neo-liberal drive with the exclusion of the poor, the impoverishment of the middle class and the obscene concentration of wealth, we must point our weapons: reflections, arguments and reasoning. These need to be presented as alternatives in the public sphere

I really hope this conference helps us on this task.