

The Sociological Imagination: Do We Build Boundaries or Do We Want Solidarity?

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This year's conference of the European Sociological Association was in the beautiful industrial city of Manchester. The title of the conference was *Europe and Beyond: Boundaries, Barriers and Belonging*. As that title suggests, the aim of the conference was to point to the boundaries between communities, society, groups of people, and families. It is important to note that within society there are some factors (such as gender, age, education, race, etc.) that can strengthen the boundaries between individuals or groups of people. These barriers take different forms. They can be seen as the impossibility to live in a safe country, or the impossibility to live in a good environment, but barriers may also be formulated as and introduced by national policies and legislation. However, the theme of this conference and of many of its papers and debates was in the sense of belonging. Through a sense of belonging we can eliminate the barriers, but we can also strengthen solidarity, empathy, and social well-being between individuals and groups of people.

Although it was a very large conference, it was very well organised with as extensive support provided by the organisers. The conference included its traditional keynote lectures, which focused on a wide range of topics (such as migration, racism, criticism of populism, gender inequalities and their implications for contemporary feminism, etc.), and the discussions around them were also diverse. On Thursday at noon the programme offered an inspiring presentation titled 'Refugees, Civil Society and the State'. Ludger Pries, from Germany, spoke about the European experience and global challenges in connection to migration. His new book was introduced by ESA Vice-President Lena Näre who stressed the dynamics between the European establishment and civil society concerning their different attitudes towards the so-called refugee crisis. Ludger Pries does not describe the 'refugee crisis' in 2015 in Europe as having been an actual crisis, but he considers the situation through the strategies and solutions adopted by European states and the European Union and how they dealt with it. In this point of view, he said, the 'refugee crisis' is a social movement, not a crisis. But how EU and European states deal with migration is what make the situation as a crisis. During the discussion Ludger Pries applied a historical perspective and recalled the Second World War. He argued that the German government now has a responsibility for refugees because of its responsibility for dislocating a large numbers of people during the Second World War.

The sociological imagination was a crucial part of all the presentations and

discussions. The conference was organised around numerous panel sessions and different research streams. Most of the panel sessions and research streams were thematically focused on current issues and encouraged the attending social scientists to think in more detail or in a larger context about different aspects of social reality. Thematically the conference was so wide that it had something to satisfy the interests of everyone. Our research interests drew us to attend sessions focused on gender inequalities in the labour market and/or precarious work and entrepreneurship and how other sociologists analyse these data in their countries. There were many opportunities to learn a great deal of new information and about contemporary research – for example, how other sociologists define self-employment, if they consider self-employment as precarious work, and how they measure and analyse precarity in the labour market.

Some of the contributions were also inspiring for research in the context of the Czech Republic. For example, a session entitled 'Emerging Forms of Precariousness: Hybrids between Employment and Self-employment' provided us with a look at international research focused on precarity in entrepreneurship. A paper titled 'Perceived Employment and Life Precariousness: A Study in Croatia, Italy and the Netherlands' presented a typology of precarious entrepreneurs, which could be applicable to the situation in the Czech Republic. This contribution presented the results of quantitative research on perceived precariousness and concealed / vulnerable self-employment, specifically determined according to the following four dimensions: income and welfare, work conditions and disempowerment, vulnerability in current life and future-oriented self-perception, and representation and rights exercising. Another paper presented in this session focused on the concept of 'passion for work'. A passion for work can be observed even in some precarious circumstances – for example, although some entrepreneurs work with great passion, they still face financial uncertainty and low incomes. However, through their passion for their work, their personal perception of their precariousness is different from that of others who are aware of the consequences of precarity, and the question is whether and to what extent this passion justifies precariousness and to what extent 'passionate' entrepreneurship is sustainable.

The family was an important topic at the conference and different concepts and forms of the family were discussed in several session and streams. The family is definitely not exhausted as a topic in world sociology. Family, different forms of families and barriers between family members are some of the subjects that were addressed in presentations focused on migration and its impact on family relationships. Many contributions also touched on the forms of family that are still prevalingly marginalised in some countries (e.g. homoparental parenting or transnational families that are divided as a result of the migration of some family members). However,

these family forms are increasingly becoming more common and widespread than traditional families.

The ESA conference sent a clear message to contemporary sociology: sociology is a science about society that should not insist on traditions but should analyse and present findings on the real status of society and should share its findings with other fields of research and of course with the public. To this end sociology should work to build a sense of belonging and to break down the barriers that often arise from adherence to tradition.