

Perspectives of European sociology

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Abstract

This article is a review on how it is organized institutionally European sociology, establishing the necessary search for the union of the various national associations to find common ground and to try to ignore the existing handicaps (especially geographical and linguistic ones). Among the common points, it is stressed the need to achieve the highest possible quality in scientific activity, particularly with regard to didactic, research and internationalization of European sociology. Finally, there is a special emphasis on the few European funds for research, bringing pressure on the European Parliament and national political authorities for them to increase their budgets for this.

KeyWords: *sociology associations, European sociology, European funds for research*

Perspectivas de la sociología europea

Resumen

Este artículo es una revisión sobre cómo está organizada institucionalmente la sociología europea, estableciendo como necesario la búsqueda de la unión de las distintas asociaciones nacionales con el fin de encontrar los puntos comunes e intentar obviar los hándicaps existentes (geográficos e idiomáticos sobre todo). Entre los puntos comunes destaca la necesidad de lograr la mayor calidad posible en la actividad científica, particularmente en lo referente a la didáctica, la investigación y la internacionalización de la sociología europea. Finalmente hace especial hincapié en los pocos fondos europeos destinados a la investigación, proponiendo una presión al Parlamento Europeo y a las autoridades políticas nacionales para que aumenten sus presupuestos para ello.

Palabras clave: *asociaciones de sociología, sociología europea, fondos europeos de investigación.*

Although it is true that sociology was born in Nineteenth-century France – at least as far as the name is concerned – with Auguste Comte, it is equally true that the years between the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century were decisive in establishing it as a university-level discipline, despite the resistance of a number of anti-sociological philosophical and historical currents and positions ideologically opposed against anything addressing social matters.

It must be noted with equal emphasis that the French contribution alone would not suffice to explain what occurred afterwards, especially in Germany and the rest of Europe, Spain and Portugal, Italy and Switzerland, just to name the territories closest to and bordering, more or less, on France itself.

Several histories of sociology have already outlined the dynamics of the contributions made by countries other than France during the early stages of the discipline. But the contextual references are generally of a national nature. It would be well worthwhile, therefore, to promote a European-wide analysis of the issue: a dedicated research project might constitute a starting point for further initiatives aimed at consolidating, for example, the network set up in 2003 in Lisbon by Portugal, Spain, France and Italy (and joined at a later stage by Greece) and formalized in 2007 as RESU, that is, the Réseau des Associations de sociologie de l'Europe et des pays du Sud [Network of the Sociological Associations of Europe and Southern Countries].

I wish to point out that a similar network exists in northern Europe; its members are the Finnish, Swedish and Norwegian associations, a group sharing a secretariat and issuing a joint publication and organising congresses on a rotation basis in one of the member countries. It is, obviously, not a question of generating opposition between north and south within the realm of sociology too; the idea is that of promoting economy-of-scale synergies capable of favouring all the countries involved.

One might ask, however, whether it is the case to limit the Réseau to founder-member countries alone or enlarge it to embrace the other nations of the Mediterranean or even those of other areas. In one hypothetical scenario it is possible to envisage a link with the Balkan organization, set up, in fact, last November in Tirana, thanks to the noteworthy endeavours of Leke Sokoli, director of the Albanian Institute of Sociology, and those of Svetla Koleva of the Bulgarian Academy of Science. This network includes, for the moment, Albania, Bulgaria and Macedonia but membership might be extended to the Danube area, that is, to Austria, Hungary, Serbia and Romania. At European level coordination between geographically close national sociological associations might represent an added asset because it is easier to organize joint conventions, involving neighbouring countries, to share research projects requiring funds provided by the Framework Programme (the eighth edition of which is forthcoming, but which penalizes to some extent the social sciences, which

fact has led to the formal protests of the national associations of sociologists as well as of single scholars and researchers), by the European Research Council (for innovative research proposals - Advanced Grants -, in favour of which significant and increasing resources are available, this in counter-tendency to the spending cuts affecting universities as well as public and private administration carried out practically everywhere in Europe), and the ISE (Initiative for Science in Europe), as well as by non-European agencies, first and foremost the USA's National Science Foundation (in which case it is useful to have the support of a US partner). Meanwhile, the European Union is about to launch new and interesting programmes aimed at promoting the objectives of Horizon 2020, focused, however, more on the so-called hard sciences and less oriented towards the Humanities but which, in any case, might need to refer to issues of demographic change, health, well-being and similar questions concerning specialist areas of sociology. In brief, even if the social sciences are not among the express proprieties of Horizon 2020 it is possible, nonetheless, to find thematic, interdisciplinary links involving them.

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Relationships between the various national sociological associations are furthered also by contacts, agreements, conventions, co-tutoring of doctorates and the various other forms of collaboration foreseen by the present-day norms. Even if it is not possible, as yet, to formalize relations between the national sociological associations it is possible to start the ball rolling at inter-personal and/or inter-university level. One might, for example, envisage a thread, which, departing from Lisbon and Madrid, might pass through Barcelona, Milan, Trento and proceed to Belgrade, Tirana, Bucharest and Sofia. A particular link would, naturally, include the various French sociological institutions, first of all Paris and (not only) Toulouse.

Undoubtedly, linguistic barriers continue to exist, but the experiences of the past few years show that nowadays European sociologists, especially those belonging to the younger generation, reach beyond their national borders and speak at least one other European language (especially French, besides English which has become a must within the social sciences, to such an extent that even congresses with French-language names, like the longest-standing Institut International de Sociologie, set up by Worms in 1893, foresee the exclusive use of English).

The southern European countries can be divided into two main linguistic streams: the neo-Latin group which includes Portugal, Spain, France and Italia, a part of Switzerland and Romania; that of the southern Slavic group which includes Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo,

Macedonia and Bulgaria. Albania may be associated with this second group although it belongs to the non-Slavic language group. This leaves out both Greece and Turkey not only because of the noteworthy differences between their two languages but also due to millennia-old historical issues. However, these two languages co-exist in Cyprus. Then there is Armenia, Turkey's neighbour, which might well recuperate its close relationship with Europe. Finally, one should not overlook the group of countries situated on the southern coast of the Mediterranean which share the Arabic language: Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt, Israel (where Hebrew is spoken too) and the Lebanon.

There is, of course, the issue of the autonomy of the single transnational associative forms. Meanwhile the presence of the European Sociological Association, ESA (which although it was set up later than it should have been, now enjoys good standing thanks to the thousands attending its conventions, its European Societies review, its state-of-the-arts web site, its European Sociologist bulletin, the efficiency of its organizational secretariat at the association's Paris headquarters c/o IRESCO) guarantees a convergence-point for the different initiatives promoted all over Europe. It will be possible to examine later how much and what kind of recognition to accord more restricted forms of association. At present ESA accepts meta-national and/or para-national formulae. A typical case is that of the Basque sociological association.

One has also to take into account the sociological market in terms of publications with a specific reference to language. Within the European context texts in English prevail, while those in French, Spanish, Portuguese and the Slavic languages are less frequent. However, books and journals in the Iberian languages are spreading and increasing in number on the other side of the Atlantic, in Central and South America (Portuguese sociology has a certain impact in Africa: in Angola and Mozambique in particular; it is the same for Spanish sociology in central and southern America).

If in a certain sense European sociology in the English language prevails and, to a lesser extent that in the French language, in a rather different way Portuguese and Spanish sociologists enjoy a considerable degree of influence in Latin America, where the origin of certain suggestions appears obvious although the area also produces autonomous proposals and achievements.

One must not overlook the migration of scholars from countries around the Mediterranean towards areas where sociology plays a greater role: the United States and Canada. In general the European sociologists who emigrated for a number of years hardly ever return home because they feel that the cultural, intellectual, social and scientific investment they made abroad would never be sufficiently recompensed there. When they do return, the advantage for their native country is considerable: one may cite, by way of example, the case of the sociolo-

gist who has worked on both sides of the Atlantic, Salvador Giner of the University of Barcelona.

Furthermore, there are many instances of privileged liaisons between European sociologists and colleagues operating first-class institutions elsewhere: for example a number of Portuguese sociologists network regularly with France while several Spanish colleagues interact with the United States, Mexico or Argentina. These exchanges are extremely beneficial as, as time goes by, they cease to be extemporaneous to become stable and rationalized within a permanent framework of on-going inter-relations, legitimized by official agreement protocols.

One new, fruitful area of collaborative study and research is developing around the dialectics existing between quantitative and qualitative methods. From a strictly methodological point of view, Europe's empirical approach has little to envy non-European sociological teams. What is lacking is on-going comparative evaluation of procedures and outcomes. We need to increase the possibility of engaging in international debates regarding these crucial issues as well as others (it suffices, for example, to give due consideration, as far as the field of sociological economics is concerned, to the present financial and monetary crisis, which should be appraised while also keeping in mind that it derives from issues that are not of an economic nature alone).

Three strands might constitute the guidelines of a new programme: didactics, research and internationalization. In actual fact, it is around these three points that the issue of the quality of scientific activity rotates. For this very reason, it would be well worthwhile making this the object of on-going, non extemporaneous initiatives capable of profiting by the best practices applied in various countries and by different scholars.

The best part of our work as social scientists is not put to adequate use due to lack of appropriate communications channels. Even if it is true that nowadays communication via Internet reduces time and offers the possibility of putting available knowledge into prompt circulation, it is also true that only face-to-face dialogue between and among scholars is capable of acting to the greatest advantage both of scholars and of their interlocutors, be they stakeholders or students attending university courses.

The objective to reach, when all comes to all, is not necessarily a sole, sociological culture, unimaginable given the differences existing between nations, languages, modes of analyzing and treating data; one may at least hypothesize some common ground regarding science and the results to be made public according to new kind of Simmelian sociability (*Geselligkeit*), in this instance in favour of a Schutzian finitimity (in this case not only regarding the area of meaning but also relations between those acting within the realm of the social sciences) per-

mitting reciprocal exchanges of knowledge, highly favourable to all and capable of paving the way to new and more efficacious pathways of investigation.

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Undoubtedly the differences between national associations are considerable. Each one has its own peculiarities: number of members, enrolment conditions, membership fees, classes of membership (scholars and professionals, for examples), types of membership (individual, collective, effective, affiliated, co-opted, correspondents, and so on), admission of didactic and/or research units, seniority (more or less recent foundation), legal status (*de facto* or *de jure*), the existence or otherwise of official headquarters and relative building to house it.

Furthermore declared aims also differ: inter-group links, coordination between bodies, disciplinary representation within a national state context, international relations references, protection of research interests (and funding of projects), promotion of sociological studies within countries, backing of inter-member cooperative projects, university support, trade-union action pro university and/or professional sociologists serving within each territory, organization and implementation of conventions, meetings and seminars, supervision of the rights and duties of sociologists according to codified deontological norms of practice and behaviour.

This list of characteristics alone brings to mind a series of possibilities but also of challenges which the sociological association must face and come to terms with. Meanwhile, among the most important tasks to address, one cannot exclude the creation and maintenance of continuous and increasing relations with other analogous associations and international institutions, at continental and world level. The state of health of a national social organism can be measured, in particular, according to its ability to engage in dialogue with individuals and/or groups outside of their own area.

The role of the associations depends, besides and to a large extent, on their history. In some cases they are greatly appreciated and not only by sociologists from their own country. In other cases they are associations just like any other. At times an academic or socio-professional bias may prevail, in either case, one notices a certain tendency to exclude the minority category altogether.

What usually escapes the national associations is the ability to monitor the discipline on the basis of the dynamics of its graduates. It happens to be difficult to know how many of them there are, what work they do, if they continue their studies, if they are satisfied with their chosen course of studies. This is a weak point not as far as mere knowledge is concerned but also with a view to revising and updating academic syllabi. Above all, it denotes a tendency to hold the outcome of one's didactic and research work in low regard. To this one it must be

added the difficulty met when trying to promote higher-level activities, beyond what it is officially established by the universities and research institutes: there is often an attempt to avoid the effort and the risk required to engage in projects of excellence where the greatest number of teachers-researchers is involved. The summer school formula is the one most commonly adopted, and more by the research sector than by the national organizations. If anything, it is international cooperative ventures more than anything else that favour joint efforts aimed at facilitating exchanges between young students.

Within this ambit, more than one association is active, like Greece or Russia or Turkey where one can find two associative formulae. In Italy there are three at present but previously there were four.

For reasons of opportunity it would appear advisable not to divide sociological associationism too much; this is to bring greater impact to bear on the institutions and, in particular, on the sponsors and /or funders of empirical projects. As we know, among other things, sociology and the social sciences in general enjoy no specific position within the ambit of the Framework Programme. In actual fact, Horizon 2020, endowed with 80 billion Euros, does not contemplate any particular strategies of which sociologists and other social sciences scholars may avail. Issues such as cultural change, education, demography, globalization, identity policies, social cohesion, defeat of poverty and governance, for instance, seem to arouse no interest on the part of the European Commission as far as research and innovation are concerned.

In fact, after the presentation of an initial document signed by social scientists which was presented to the European Commissioner, Miss Geoghegan-Quinn, on the 10th November 2011 during a meeting held in London, no result has been forthcoming, despite the appreciation expressed by the commissioner herself (<http://www.allea.org/Content/ALLEA/SSH/Speech-Commissioner-09-11-11.pdf>).

Now the various social sciences and humanities associations are called upon to bring pressure to bear on the European Parliament and national political authorities so that the rationale of Horizon 2020 is modified. Otherwise there is the serious danger that funding in our sector will be reduced drastically if not eliminated altogether. At the moment, the budget made available is far below what it was promised.

This grave situation is evident to a number of the umbrella organizations which embrace several different associations: for example the Inter-agency Task Group on Social Sciences and Humanities in Europe (ALLEA – ALL European Academies; the ESF - European Science Foundation: the Standing Committees for the Humanities and Social Sciences; the ECHIC - European Consortium of Humanities Institutes and Centres; the Net4Society - Network of SSH National Contact Points; the SSH ERA-Nets). Evidently, however, not even their instances,

presented by Dr. Ruediger Klein, Executive Director of the European Federation of National Academies of Sciences and Humanities (ALLEA), have been given due consideration. A new open letter of protest has already been sent, endorsed by far more signatures than the previous one (<http://www.eash.eu/openletter2011/>).

A problem that is in some way related to this is the problematic relationship existing between sociology and many of the other sciences, even those of a strictly social nature (it suffices to recall the on-going conflict with the discipline of history, which – according to French historian Paul Veyne – is perfectly equipped to replace sociology).

Furthermore, similar idiosyncrasies simply undermine efficacious approaches to the establishment of the relevance of all the scientific knowledge that may be obtained from every sector of the knowable, without any kind of artificial distinction between the so-called hard and soft sciences.

When all comes to all, it is the associations themselves that can and must claim the focal importance of the science of sociology to daily life in contemporary society. But to do so, an extra effort must be made regarding the present state of affairs: an increasing internationalization may represent the beginning of a new phase for sociology, not only in the south of Europe but in the rest of Europe and beyond. We must, accordingly, row upstream, against the flow of the present crisis. The best of luck with the job, therefore.

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