In this forum we are publishing ‘An Open Letter to the European Sociological Association: “Conference Business”: as Usual?’ written by three Czech junior scholars in reaction to the ESA conference held in Prague, along with a series of solicited responses from ESA representatives, members, and speakers at the last conference. Believing in the potential of the discipline and the sociological community to reflect on itself, we have taken this as an opportunity to come up with new ideas about the organisation and modes of participation at international academic conferences.

As some of the contributors argue, organising a conference as large as what the ESA conference has evolved into is a process constrained by many factors and uncertainties, which often go unseen and are hard to imagine for ordinary participants. It is thus, firstly, valuable to articulate and share these problems within the community. As sociologists we know that unless we remain aware of the often hidden infrastructures of everyday (academic) life we can understand little, let alone make a change. Secondly, while some of the infrastructures may be more persistent than we could easily imagine and wish for, we believe that even partial organisational changes have the potential to make a substantial effect. We hope that the current debate generates some ideas for realistic changes. Thirdly—and on this point we will need an even wider and ongoing debate within the community—our individual expectations, possibilities, and values may substantially differ. Yes, we are all academics, but we come from different parts of the world, economically and socially, we have gendered experiences of academia, we are at various stages in the academic hierarchy, and, importantly, we may differ in our understanding of sociology as a professional, policy, critical and public project. Spelling out the diversity of who we are and of our expectations is the first necessary step towards inclusivity, which we hopefully all hold dear.

In the forum we publish the Open Letter first, followed by reactions from people engaged in the organisation of the Prague event, who spell out some difficult practical issues involved in producing such a conference, issues that may at times take the wind out of the sails of the noble ideas put forth in the Open Letter. These contributions are from Tomáš Kostelecký, the director of the Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences and the head of the Local Organ-
ising Committee, and Tiziana Nazio, who was a member of the previous ESA Executive Committee. Three contributions follow by Mark Featherstone, Akosua Adomako Ampofo, and John Holmwood, who set the issues raised in the letter within the wider context of academia today, in Europe and globally, but also offer some ideas about how things could be done differently at future conferences. Finally, we present contributions by Frank Welz, the current ESA president, and Laura Horn, the current ESA vice-president, who provide a grounded reflection of the Association’s take on its conferences and European sociology more widely, and also offer concrete ideas for the future.

We hope that this forum is not the end but a new impulse for a debate that will continue. For this reason the authors of the Open Letter set up a weblog ‘Conference Business’ as Usual? (https://conferencebusiness.wordpress.com) where other ESA members, non-members, and not-yet members can join the debate. And it is hoped that the discussion will also continue elsewhere, as one thing is clear: an inclusive, socially responsible European sociological conference cannot simply be forged by local organisers or by the ESA leadership. It can only grow out of European sociologists’ continuous engagement with socially relevant topics and out of their ties with local, national, and European publics, NGOs, and journalists and other non-academic actors. If sociology and other social sciences are performative in relation to the subject of their study, we must assume, as European researchers, the unavoidable responsibility we have for contributing to (un)making Europe and shaping European society and societies.
‘Conference Business’ as Usual?
An Open Letter to the ESA

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As participants of the 12th Conference of the European Sociological Association (ESA), we were disappointed by the discrepancy between the main topic and the actual event. The ESA conference is an important academic meeting that influences European sociology and consequently we feel that it is important to open discussion about its purpose, format, and desirable impacts, issues that seem to have not been questioned in recent debate.

We are well aware that the ESA conference is embedded in the much larger structures of the academic world of which it represents just one small part. Despite this, we believe it is important not to be cynical and accept the view that when things are done in a certain way they cannot be changed. Some scholars are uncomfortable with mass events like the ESA conference, for reasons that we shall outline below. They react by avoiding them, but that will only serve to deepen cleavages within European sociology. We have therefore decided not to remain silent. We hope that the comments and proposals we present in this letter can help make the ESA conferences better and more consistent with the issues they address.

The introduction in the conference programme refers to sociology’s theoretical and empirical inquiry into the world around us, the sociological imagination, and, most important, to the responsibility that the global sociological community has to confront the exponential increase in social inequality. If one of the main challenges of contemporary sociology is grasping the depth and the extraordinary acceleration of processes of social change, we need to question the tools we use when we attempt to do so. Calls to alter the way we do things always seem naïve, idealistic, or radical, and often run up against the limits of our imagination. Still, it is not enough to resort to just the usual process of getting things done. In order to study the ‘new conditions’ properly we need new approaches and this extends to much wider practices in academia. If our society is currently facing profound and sweeping changes, we should respond not only by adjusting our ideas but also by rethinking the ways in which we organise and do things.

Inequality was declared as the main topic of the conference, but the actual event in no way differed from the (unfortunately) standard style of conference

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tourism, which is profoundly exclusive in design and serves to affirm and deepen inequalities instead of addressing them. This fact raises some important questions: what are the real ambitions of this event? Should we be content with an event that sets self-presentation and networking as its objectives that are fulfilled through participants’ sponsored travel to an interesting city and ostentatious social events?

We would like to point out three aspects of the ESA conference event that we found particularly inconsistent with its theme.

1. Exclusivity

The prohibitive pricing of the ESA conference excluded people from smaller institutions, poor countries, and early career scholars with limited research budgets from attending. Consequently, these people were excluded from both presenting their work and networking. Attendance was based on the ability to obtain funds for it.

The conference’s main social event was held at one of the most luxurious places on the Vltava River. The entrance fee to this event alone was another 40 EUR, which for many people was not affordable. If we take seriously the challenge of confronting issues of inequality, we have to start with ourselves. A less exclusive location for the dinner and more inclusive conditions for taking part (e.g. more affordable fees) would be more conducive to fostering equal and informal discussions and would create a better space in which to actually address the issue of inequality—an issue that will certainly remain on sociology’s agenda, regardless of the topic of the concrete ESA conference.

2. The ivory tower

As well as the academic exclusivity of the event, which served to reproduce the hierarchy that exists within the sociological field, the event did not actively engage with the public. Today, when migration is a pressing topic in Europe and several presentations addressed it explicitly, it is disappointing that at least the outcomes of the conference debates on migration were not presented as a press release for the Czech and international media. The conference was a self-contained event whose only connection to the public sphere was one interview with Zygmunt Bauman in a Czech newspaper and a short interview with Gurminder K. Bhambra on Czech public television. There could have been more media interviews with conference participants and speakers, as the media are an indisputable tool by which to bring about change.

There is also a bigger question: does not the very nature of inequality require that it be tackled by means of dialogue with the public? If we want to offer society sociological knowledge and ideas to counter fatalism and apathy while
helping find ways towards more desirable developments in the future, we cannot simply engage in exchanges behind closed doors. We have to actively consider the public impact, whether that means an impulse for policymakers, the empowerment of various stakeholders, or simply the raising of public awareness about important issues.

The conference could open up more to the public by holding lectures, discussions, seminars, round tables, and workshops that welcome the public, politicians, or stakeholders. The great accumulation of international resources could be also used to create various educational events for youth. The exchange can productively work both ways—for example, working groups or panels could be formed in which sociologists, political actors, NGO representatives, and people concerned with particular social issues can discuss these issues together.

While we do not aim to dilute the academic exchange the ESA conference offers into events for the general public, we feel that a more systematic focus on what is beyond academia would be advantageous. The absence of sessions for the general public and the very limited outcome shared with the media raise important questions. How can we attain the level of understanding and awareness we aspire to? Is the closed exchange of academic knowledge what we want European sociology to be?

3. Social responsibility

The need to implement socially responsible measures seems to have been recognised as the lunch boxes were prepared by migrant women from Ethnocatering. However, the question is why this conscientious approach to the event’s organisation was not carried further, because the coffee breaks were serviced by a regular catering business, the hefty conference programme and all the conference papers were printed on regular, not recycled, paper, and there was a large amount of merchandise given to participants that was truly unnecessary. The ‘socially responsible T-shirts’ almost seemed a joke in this setting. True, these are seemingly minor issues, but re-evaluating the approach that was taken would be consistent with addressing the issues that we have deemed so important from an academic point of view: unsustainability, inequality, and exclusion.

We feel that the practice of outsourcing the organisation of the event to an international conference provider should not be so automatically adhered to just because it’s easier to do so and it’s always been done that way. We need at the very least to start a discussion of how the standard approaches to organising this conference, while they make it easier to bring it about, are in their effect exclusionary and at odds with some of the principles of equality and accessibility that sociology concerns itself with, and consequently these approaches actually prevent the event from fulfilling its potential, both in terms of participation and the thoroughness with which it explores its themes.
As well as re-evaluating the basic organisational framework of the event, there are all sorts of individual steps that can be taken, such as including more socially responsible enterprises in the practical organisation of the event (for example, to provide the coffee breaks or place for the main social event) and addressing the wider issue of consumption: printing less and on recycled paper, limiting the free merchandise, providing fair trade coffee, and so forth. There is also the question of leftover food: this year the lunches were given out for free and unfinished food from the coffee breaks was not thrown away but given to a local independent community centre. We would like to highlight this as a good practice and hope it will continue in the coming years too and hope that, while the idea was born out of the local organiser’s friendly relations with the centre in Prague, it is a practice that can be picked up and continued at future ESA events.

Although the discrepancy between the topic of the ESA conference and the actual event was greatest in 2015, previous ESA events have been organised in a very similar way, so we see our comments as pertaining to systemic issues. We call for a discussion within the executive bodies of the ESA and within the sociological community as a whole in the hope that there is an alternative.
A Reaction to the Open Letter
to the ESA from the Chair
of the Local Organisational Committee

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I have to admit that when I first read the open letter to the European Sociological Association titled “‘Conference Business’ as Usual?”, and written by three conference participants, PhD candidates Tomáš Bek, Petr Kubala, and Terezie Lokšová, from the Department of Sociology at Masaryk University in Brno, the Czech Republic, I felt rather uneasy. The very first idea that came to my mind was something like: ‘Oh dear … it’s a million times easier to criticise a conference than to organise one.’ But when I’d calmed down somewhat, I realised that the authors of the open letter were asking some questions that are substantive and deserve to be discussed. Then, later, when I was asked by the Editor-in-Chief of the Czech Sociological Review to contribute to this discussion I promised to contribute an opinion as one of the organisational insiders. As the former Chair of the Local Organisational Committee I will comment mostly on the practical issues mentioned by the authors of the open letter and leave most of the theoretical or even philosophical issues raised by them untouched.

In the beginning section of the open letter the authors explain their motivation for writing it as their disappointment with ‘the discrepancy between the main topic and the actual event’. Although the title of the conference, ‘Differences, Inequalities and Sociological Imagination’, refers to three keywords, from reading the opening paragraphs of the open letter it seems clear to me that for its authors ‘the main topic’ was inequality. They contrast the topic of the conference with the actual event that, as they say, ‘in no way differed from the (unfortunately) standard style of conference tourism, which is profoundly exclusive in design and serves to affirm and deepen inequalities instead of addressing them’. Later in the open letter they explicitly formulate three aspects that they considered ‘particularly inconsistent with its theme’.

The first aspect of the conference the authors of the open letter criticise is its ‘exclusivity’. They claim that the price of the ESA conference was ‘prohibitive’ and, according to them, ‘excluded people from smaller institutions, poor countries and early career scholars with limited research budgets from attending’. As the Local Organisational Committee, that I chaired, did not make the

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decision about the conference fees (the ESA Executive Committee made that decision), I can comment on that relatively independently. I think that the simple fact that the Prague conference was attended by a record number of 3459 participants (about a 29% increase compared to the previous ESA conference in Torino) does not support the idea of prohibitively high conference fees. I am aware that the price of attending the conference included more than just the conference fee, but even the cost of transportation to Prague and the costs of accommodation or dining in the city were somewhat lower than the costs of previous ESA conferences (local transportation was provided for free by the City of Prague to all participants). Yet, as a sociologist I know very well that, although the overall cost for an ‘average participant’ may not be too high, the cost could be high for some participants or could even prohibit potential participants from participating. It should be stressed, however, that not all participants paid the same fee. On the contrary, 24 different fee categories were set up, taking into account whether attendants are ESA members or non-members, whether they are students or not, whether they are from a richer or poorer country (we used the politically correct labels of ‘A’ and ‘B’ countries), and according to whether they paid an early fee, late fee, or wanted to pay on-site. Thus, the cost of the fee could have been as low as 80 EUR (a student from a poorer country who was an ESA member and paid the early fee), or as high as 520 EUR (a full participant from a richer country who was not a member of ESA and paid on-site). In fact, not too many participants actually paid either of these fees (37 students and 5 full participants, respectively), and the typical participant paid either the full, early, ESA member fee of 190 EUR (912 people), the full, early, non-ESA member fee of 370 EUR (615 people), or the student, early, non-member fee of 160 EUR (468 people).

I must admit that, despite the wide range of discount fees, I personally know sociologists who declined attendance at the ESA conference in Prague and cited the high conference fees as the main reason for their decision. And this I regret. It is also true that we, as the organisers, received some individual requests for special discounts for various reasons which we could not accept as we were bound to follow the agreed rules of the game. But the statistical data on conference participants do not support the idea that only the ‘privileged’ could attend. Students, for example, accounted for 32% of participants at the Prague conference, which is a noticeably higher figure than at the previous conference in Torino (28%). It is true that the share of participants from poorer B countries amounted to only 12% of the total (a decline of 21% from Torino), but when the data are examined more closely it is clear that this decline can be fully attributed to the simple fact that, owing to rising GDP several formerly B countries had become A countries. These ‘newly rich’ countries included Poland, Russia, and Hungary. Yet, the increase in conference fees evidently did not prevent sociologists from these three countries from participating. On the contrary, combined they accounted for 13% of participants at the Prague conference.

When debating fee levels and their structure one should not forget something so obvious that many fail to take it into account: fees are primarily collected
to pay for the costs of the conference. As the ESA conference is not a medical congress, where a substantial part of the costs are covered by corporate sponsors (guess whether they do it for altruistic reasons or not), the conference fees are the single most important source of ESA conference revenue, without which there can be no conferences at all. In the Prague case, the fees generated no less than 86.5% of the conference budget, while money from sponsors and exhibitors only 4.5% of total revenue (the remaining 9% was revenue collected to cover services offered to participants—the Congress Party, the welcome cocktail for accompanying persons, lunch boxes, and print versions of the full programme). Although the total revenue of the conference was high in nominal terms, so were the expenditures, which included items like rental of the conference premises (yes, we had to pay for that), rental of the technical equipment, catering and social events (most of which was included in the participant fees), the costs of the professional organisers who helped us to organise the event, information materials and other conference materials, programmes, web, programming, graphic design, mailing, the labour costs of the local organiser, and value added tax (21% on goods, 15% on services). When the necessary costs of running the conference are calculated, it’s clear that in fact those participants who paid the reduced fees (like students or people from poorer countries) did not pay enough to cover their share of the costs, and they were subsidised by those who paid the higher fees. Despite this, every participant was provided with the same services at the conference.

There was one exception to the above-mentioned general rule and that was the Congress Party. The last point criticised by the authors of the open letter pertaining to the ‘exclusivity’ issue was the overly pricey Congress Party, which was held, as they say, ‘at one of the most luxurious places on the Vltava River’. I can understand that 40 EUR could be considered quite high a price for a Congress Party by some participants, particularly those who have lower incomes and whose institutions refused to cover such costs from their institutional budgets. Nevertheless, we wanted to provide something memorable for those who could afford it, and we the organisers do not regret having offered participants something like this. I can assure the readers that we considered many different places where it might have been possible to hold the Congress Party, but in the end we chose the place we believed would provide us with the best value for money. Of course, a cheaper version of a Congress Party could have been offered in a less attractive location with less or cheaper food, without music, etc. But maybe then we would have got an open letter from British, German, or Italian professors complaining about the low quality of the services offered. In comments on an open question participants were asked in the satisfaction questionnaire compiled after the conference (1772 respondents, Q: Please tell us what you liked the most and your suggestions for improving the organisation of the next ESA Conference) we did receive complaints of this type. One respondent, for example, complained that the transportation options at the conference venue were very limited and no taxis were at the venue. This anecdotal note just illustrates the simple fact that there are huge social differences between the sociologists who took part in the Prague
ESA conference. This is true, but we can hardly do anything other than to offer all types of participants the most of what they want, while bearing in mind that we cannot make everybody happy with everything. Finally, I would like to mention that the Congress Party was not the only opportunity for socialisation. On the very first night of the conference, after the plenary sessions, every participant was invited for a Welcome Cocktail, which provided them with another interesting place to meet, and, thanks to support from the City of Prague, food, drink, and a social programme as well.

The second aspect of the conference criticised by the authors was, as they label it, ‘the ivory tower’ aspect. They call for more publically engaged sociology and expressed criticism that the conference ‘did not actively engage with the public’. Here I partly agree with them; we as sociologists could try to be even more publicly visible. The problem, however, is that engagement with the public requires media that are interested in sociology. The authors of the open letter claim that the ‘only connection to the public sphere was one interview with Zygmunt Bauman in a Czech newspaper and a short interview with Gurmander K. Bhambra on Czech public television’. As a Czech citizen I should add for the international audience that this was a one-page article in the most widely read Czech national newspaper (tabloids excluded), and the interview was presented in the most respected and highly watched news programme of Czech public TV. In this respect we could hardly hope for more. Besides that, members of the Local Organisational Committee arranged several other interviews with local, regional, and specialised newspapers and magazines. I personally was interviewed by several journalists during the conference; in most cases these were live talks over the telephone with people from different public or private radio stations. All these activities were less visible so I am not surprised that the authors of the open letter did not notice them. The authors also express regret that the ‘outcomes of the conference debates on migration were not presented’, which is a slightly surprising statement for me, as I am not aware that such ‘outcomes’ exist. In fact, the issue of migration was almost the only topic the journalists calling to interview me were interested in. They were generally impressed that so many sociologists had come to Prague and wanted me to comment on this. They then usually assumed that if so many sociologists were gathered in one place they must be able to find a solution to any social problem very quickly (something like the theory of critical mass). That is why several of them asked me basically the same question, whether we (the sociologists gathered in Prague) had ‘already solved the migration issue’. I am sorry that I was unable to give them a simple answer to their question.

The authors of the open letter suggest that the ‘conference could open up more to the public by holding lectures, discussions, seminars, round tables and workshops that welcome the public, politicians or stakeholders’. This is an interesting proposal worth thinking about, but it evidently goes beyond what we usually consider an academic conference to be. From the organisational point of view, I just want to point out that we answered several tens of thousands (that fig-
ure is not a typo!) of e-mails, and we organised 2765 different presentations within three-and-a-half days. We had to organise about 700 sessions of different types, sometimes 70 of them in parallel. The full conference programme had 477 pages (the book of abstracts available only in electronic format had about 2000 pages) and it took several days just to do the editing (under the time pressure we were literally working in shifts, 24 hours a day). Simply speaking, what the authors suggest is theoretically possible but it would be very difficult to achieve in practice without hiring more people to organise the event (which would increase the cost of the conference).

Finally, the third issue raised by the authors is that of social responsibility. They appreciate that ‘the lunch boxes were prepared by migrant women from Ethnocatering’, but ask ‘why this conscientious approach to the event’s organisation was not carried further’. Here the answer is simple, albeit not short. When the decision was made by ESA that the 2015 conference would be held in Prague, and I officially became the Chair of the Local Organisational Committee, I felt the extremely heavy burden of responsibility for ensuring the conference’s success. We set up a team of committed and hardworking people who started preparations for the conference well ahead of the event. Expecting about 2000 to 2500 participants to attend the ESA event in Prague, we made the strategic decision that, while we would be able to handle many activities ourselves (like organising the call for abstracts, abstract selection, programme preparation, dealing with participants), there would be some tasks we could not do ourselves (like collecting fees, preparing food, serving participants during lunches and coffee breaks, manufacturing conference materials, booking hotel rooms for participants, dealing with visa issues). Although we certainly did not outsource the ‘organisation of the event to an international conference provider’ (maybe we were working so professionally that in the end the authors reached that conclusion?), it was clear that we would need partners and suppliers who could assume responsibility for those parts of the conference organisation that we were unable (or did not want) to do ourselves. Consequently, the organisation of the conference comprised also dozens or maybe hundreds of business negotiations with partners and suppliers. As someone with only two years of work experience in the corporate sector, I had to admit that I did not feel comfortable in that position. It was definitely not my favourite part of the conference preparations.

Initially I thought that our negotiating power would increase as the number of people who registered as participants rose. This was the case up to a certain tipping point. When we learned that we were going to host not 2000 but probably 3000 or even 3500 conference participants, we came to realise that as the number of participants increased, the number of potential partners and suppliers was decreasing dramatically. In the end we had trouble finding anyone who could provide the service of supplying goods in the quantities we needed. Sometimes I felt like someone who had been given the task of quickly and safely organising a tour for 500 people from Europe to America—whatever you may wish at the
beginning, at some point you end up negotiating with people linked either to Airbus or Boeing. They know you cannot really avoid them; they aren’t cheap, but they are professionals, and they know how to transport large numbers of people over the Atlantic Ocean and have airplanes with a good reputation and solid references. When one is responsible for the success of a conference, you can try to include as many social or socially responsible businesses among the suppliers as possible, but in the end you need to be assured that everything will be done on time and at a level of quality that is acceptable to conference participants. We gave some social business a chance to serve as providers, an example being Ethnocatering, under whose management migrant women prepared the lunch boxes. They worked hard and did their best, but privately, after the conference, they told us that they had been working at the very edge of their capacity. Notably, in the participant satisfaction survey the quality of the lunches was the most criticised aspect of the conference. Whether this was because the lunches were prepared by a semi-professional social enterprise or simply because sociologists like other people tend generally to be more critical when it comes to evaluating food, I do not know. But the coffee breaks served by a ‘regular catering business’ generally obtained better marks (see the chart above).

The authors of the open letter also came up with some suggestions as to how the conference could be made more socially responsible. For example, they criticised the ‘hefty conference programme’. But the full programme book was offered on USB sticks or on-line and the paper version was offered at an extra cost to discourage people from using it. Still, over 800 people bought the printed
programme book. Other suggestions like printing on recycled paper or providing free trade coffee are nice in theory but difficult to achieve in practice. With the time and budget constraints we were operating under we simply could not afford to do either of these things. It would certainly be possible to provide the participants with less merchandise, but I wonder how many conference participants would complain that they did not get what they were used to from previous (or other) conferences. Finally, the authors of the open letter criticise the fact that we offered participants the option to buy ‘socially responsible T-shirts’ which they claim ‘almost seemed a joke in this setting’. Here I must openly say that the ‘socially responsible T-shirts’ truly were meant to be a joke. Evidently, not everyone has the same sense of humour. But that doesn’t matter, as it makes the world interestingly diverse.
Some Thoughts on the Open Letter

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Thanks for the opportunity to respond to these critical reflections, which are welcome and helpful for ESA to be able to engage in active discussion to improve its procedures, but also to share more widely about steps already taken. This open letter offers the chance to debate in more detail the often overlooked organisational aspects of the nitty-gritty of conference organisation, which are far more complex and multifaceted than what might be envisaged, but for that no less far reaching in their consequences.

When Sandro Cattacin, Chair of the Local Conference Committee (LOC) for the ESA 2011 conference in Lausanne came to Torino to share their experience with conference organisation (and hand on the next one to us), he started by describing the sleepless nights due to the great degree of uncertainty associated with attendance forecast and budget constraints (the figures on registered participants were terribly low until the actual closing day of registration, sometime in May, quite late in organisational terms to square the budget and avoid a potential economic loss). We knew very little by then about (this large) conference organisation and even less around what to expect from how submissions were linked to acceptance rates by different Research Networks (RN) and Research Streams (RS) and/or registration for the conference, and from how the composition of participants might change over time, and from the very behaviours of potential attendees (members and non-members, students and regular). We certainly could not afford an economic loss, and we started by committing ourselves to decreasing the degree of uncertainty and, to spare the next organisers a loss of sleep, by analysing and collecting empirical evidence (and by building a time series) from the documents of previous conferences. We started with the 2009 edition in Lisbon, the first of the ‘very large’ conference series, and by conducting repeated detailed data analyses of webpage usage, submissions, registrations, and their development over time, and we finished with the post-conference survey results and free field comments. We learned a lot from this exercise, which was handed on to Prague and pursued further on that occasion by monitoring the entire process and helping to inform the debate on improvements to future conference organisation by the ESA. This analytical exercise was indeed intended to reduce the degree of uncertainty around the budget (which should always be managed...
conservatively in the interest of ESA survival) in order to increase ESA leverage around the fee structure and the sustainability of measures targeted to support inclusion. The investments made by the latest two rounds of conference organising (LOC and Chairs) were aimed at promoting incremental learning in the organisation and capitalising on cumulated experience.

This disclosure serves to acknowledge the great effort that the ESA has already made in internally questioning and discussing changes in the organisational model since it was born as an association with smaller conferences managed within the academic community on a voluntary basis. Professional Conference Organisers (PCO) have been in charge of only some of the duties (registration and billing, hotels, signage, and some smaller operational tasks related to the catering and premises) as necessary, when the conference grew to be so big, but the scientific programme was, and still is, firmly in the ESA’s hands. Changes began after the 2011 experience, when the PCO committed, but failed, to respond to the ESA’s complex scientific organisation: sociologists, unlike medical conferences, have far more presenters among attendees and sessions to be managed, and a much wider array of academics are involved in the process of abstract evaluation and selection and of programme building (which is in the hands of the RN/RS and subject to change up to the very last minute).

But straight to the authors’ critiques. It is my impression that the ESA has already begun to rethink the ways in which conferences are organised. It has done so through reflections, exchanges, and discussions within the Executive Committee(s), consultations with other, similar organisations and their practices (especially demographers, who have similar conference attendance and similar needs), but also by changing practices. The first change was a reshuffling of timing (a more compact session schedule and fewer options competing with regular sessions) and seeking more direct input from RNs in organising the Special Sessions, practices introduced since the 2013 event; then the schedule was moved from Wednesday to Friday to maximise attendance on the last conference day, a change introduced in 2015. Since 2013 an increasing emphasis has also been placed on environmental and social factors and sustainability.

Exclusivity. The ESA, unfortunately, does not have the capacity to counteract or address (alone) the dynamics of the general economy and the retrenchment of funding for research. It is also very difficult to cluster individual situations across so many countries and institutional settings in order to draw clear and consistent boundaries to define entitlement to support. For example, what defines an early career stage in Italy, in terms of access to funding, might be very different from what defines this stage in Turkey, the UK, Germany, or Finland. The different languages and contractual practices used by national research institutes are another barrier to equalising opportunities. Determining a set of rules that would try to address this (without causing even more segmentation) is a daunting task in itself, and trying to implement them might become very difficult and costly: any (necessary) certification of a certain status would have to be validated (by whom?)
against credentials provided by different institutions, in different languages, with unsustainable organisational costs.

These thoughts are some of many that came up in intense exchanges before the 2013 and 2015 conferences, which in Torino, under the Presidency of Pekka Sulkunen, resulted in the decision to provide very cheap accommodation to all participants on a non-discriminatory basis. Instead of discounted fees to some (difficult to trace) categories of participants, the ESA provided an even larger discount (in kind) on lodging (newly built students’ accommodation on-site or in the city centre), as travel and lodging costs represent the larger share of expenses in conference participation. However, of the up to 1200 places offered, less than 350 were finally used, with some surprises in the coverage of use by country: attendees from the UK, Germany, Italy, France, The Netherlands, the USA, Canada, Finland, Belgium, Israel, Austria, and Switzerland made up 50% of the residence occupancy, while around 40% were attendees from Poland, Turkey, Spain, Portugal, The Russian Federation, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Estonia, Ireland, Greece, Romania, Serbia, and Slovenia. This suggests again how the issue of which characteristics (younger or more experienced researchers, from which country) to prioritise for supporting inclusion is a rather complex one.

Two new measures were introduced by the Executive Committee in 2015, under the presidency of Carmen Leccardi. The ESA allocated support for conference participation to increase accessibility for graduate students and junior scholars: a series of 74 ‘junior scholar grants’ were established by the ESA and awarded by RNs (two each) to recently graduated scholars (students or graduates after 2010). The ESA also financed a reduction in ESA membership fees (which in turn granted a reduced conference fee) for those scholars who came from poorer countries, had their abstract accepted in Prague, and had been awarded their PhD within the last ten years. The message accompanying the latter measure read: ‘ESA realises that there are other people who may not fall into this category who are also facing financial difficulty. To help with this we have ensured that there is low cost accommodation available. We also realise that some countries may be characterised by greater pressures than others. However, having considered a range of feasible options we think that this is the fairest and most practical response to these issues.’

It is around the conference fees structure, in turn a function of the composition of attendees, that the ESA can trigger a redistributive policy, which is something done by making an adjustment between Band 1 and 2 countries (restored after Geneva). It must be noted that the average fee paid by attendees has not increased, and has even slightly decreased, over time (and it is in line with other large conferences): from 242 EUR in Geneva 2011, to 226 EUR in Torino 2013, and 232 EUR in Prague 2015. However, if redistribution is to be pursued, either through ad-hoc measures and/or through the fee structure, it is unavoidable that the fees for some groups (faculties from Band 1 countries) are set larger than those for other participants (students and delegates from Band 2 countries). It is
a daunting task to design a group that is inclusive of (differently placed) early career researchers when the types of contractual relationships and their conditions are so different across countries, and when periods of intermittent or short-term employment can last for a very long time before permanent inclusion is achieved. Until tenure is reached there may (or may not) be entitlement to a reimbursement when funds are provided: in Italy and Spain, for example, tenure is rarely obtained before the age of 40 and often well after that, but tenured employment alone does not suffice to secure access to funding opportunities.

All in all, for what has been in place most recently, the ESA has already introduced several redistributive measures: one directed at discounted lodging open to all participants (the value of which is probably beyond that of any discount in fees, over the three days), plus two measures tailored to specific groups of attendees (in 2015); in addition, before and after 2011, there has been significant subsidisation of both student rates (incorporated into the fee structure), who are a large and increasing part of attendees, and of participants from weaker economies (Band 2 countries).

The conference dinner. This again depends on the city hosting the conference, but there are usually not many places that have the required capacity (subject to change until quite late in registration) available and able to provide a guarantee of experience and successful and smooth organisation and that can afford the security measures that are required by law and the insurance policy covering participants at the conference and its events. These places tend to ask for a commercial rate, in a regime of ‘quasi-monopoly’ that weakens any bargaining position. There are, however, many more occasions for informal exchange over the three days (lunches, coffee breaks, sessions, all the other evenings and alternative events), beyond the conference dinner.

Media coverage. This changes from one conference to the next and depends also on the interest of the local and national press. In Torino press coverage was quite substantial for an academic event (both local and national news and national newspapers). Furthermore, a remarkable initiative under the presidency of Pekka Sulkunen was pursued in trying to organise an international press conference for journalists (invited by the ESA). This, however, did not take off, not just because of the financial cost, but also because of the poor response from journalists.

Further events involving the larger public. This might imply a further organisational step in an already extremely demanding task, and one in which the energy and time of local engaged sociologists would be very welcome indeed. Although foremost a scientific event, ESA conferences could become fertile ground for these initiatives if members felt it was time for it, but this would require intense involvement ‘on site’ in the preparations and would require advertising: how to advertise the events and to whom? Which interested stakeholders and citizens would be willing and free to come during working hours on a workday (or holiday) and which topics would they be interested in discussing? In devising this series of events, potential speakers should be invited to contribute. Firstly,
they would have to be selected, contacted, and organised in response to demands emerging bottom-up, locally, rather than top-down (from the ESA itself). Secondly, logistics for all speakers and insurance coverage for all (non-registered) participants should be granted, spaces organised, and a fair selection of topics of interest and speakers secured.

Social responsibility. This was a concept firstly proposed by the Torino LOC team and it was included in the process of organising the conference (beyond its theme) in 2011 (http://www.esa11thconference.eu/the-conference/concept). In its original form this concept affected the choice of caterer (a training programme for prison inmates), but also all the other organisational aspects: the T-shirts for volunteers and the conference bags were made from local cotton and printed by disabled workers; the content of the bags was chosen to minimise environmental impact in terms of both materials and items; the provision of services included the provision of tap water available throughout the premises (and the distribution of compostable water bottles) and only locally grown, seasonal food; plastic and paper were minimised; the conference programme was available on demand at a symbolic price (before the Torino conference it had been offered free to every attendee), while printing facilities were offered on the campus free of charge; entertainment was provided by non-professionals, to whom a donation (violins for a music training project in schools in poor neighbourhoods) was made, and a childcare service was made available on demand. Childcare proved the most difficult bit to achieve, because of the need for professional and experienced child-minders (regular childcare teachers) for an uncertain number of potential users of different ages, languages, and needs, over different timing, and with extremely strict regulations applying to the spaces deemed suitable for children’s access and use. Finally, in the Torino edition, like in Prague, leftovers from the coffee breaks and lunches were given away to shelters. Furthermore, some of the unsold books on display were donated by editors to the library on campus for the enjoyment and benefit of local students.

It is an ESA tradition to use volunteers (mostly students granted access to the conference), and in Torino the innovative use of voluntary citizens was introduced, which increased the participation and outreach to the general public. All these, both in Torino and Prague, were initiatives taken at the local level, seconded and welcomed by ESA Executive Committees, which always proved very open and responsive to local initiatives and demands by its members whenever feasible, but they are not properly ESA policy. We hope the next LOC can pursue and improve on these initiatives, in conformity with their resources and national contexts, or even for this to become a characteristic trait of ESA conferences for the future.

Outsourcing to PCOs. ESA conference organisation is not entirely outsourced, but is instead strongly in the hands of academics from the LOC, under the supervision and guidance of the Conference Committee and more generally the Executive within the ESA. The degree of outsourcing may vary slightly from
one conference to the next, depending on local circumstances, and might increase in the future, but the direction is already that of progressive internalisation over time. As always, there are trade-offs in any complex system involving multiple actors and their—sometimes conflicting—interests: ESA, LOC, PCO, conference participants (among them ESA members and other non-members). Professional Conference Organisers (PCO) are those best suited to prevent the risk that services might not meet the standards required, and they are able to provide insurance coverage, pursue billing, keep track of (changes in) registrations, provide accommodation when required, contract services, and meet given regulations in very heterogeneous national and local legislative settings. The LOC, based on site within the local networks, culture, and language, is best suited to oversee and handle the uncertainty regarding the number (and composition) of attendees, an uncertainty that remains until very late in the organisational process (when the commitment to services has already been made), and to have control over the services, choice of locations, and budget (i.e. on PCO), which makes it the best-positioned link between the ESA and all the other actors involved. The ESA, on the other side, has to meet its statutory goals and take charge of the scientific programme, and it can intervene on matters of both the fee structure and the most suitable choice of location (and LOC), but it would require a much greater organisational structure to be able to efficiently internalise more of the conference preparation and its many tasks and responsibilities.

Managing the entire process centrally would offer more control over the budget and the organisational process, but it would entail a far greater workload and higher personnel costs to hire trained and specialised person(s) only around ‘peak times’ every two years (both abstract handling and registration can be very burdensome tasks that continue over several months, December to August, every second year). The main risk would be to find, train, and grant continuity for several extra units of personnel that would operate in Paris, some of whom only on an intermittent basis. But ‘internal’ central management could also give rise to new uncertainties and weaken local control (networks, regulations, logistics, firms providing services, assuring standards and quality, visiting premises, negotiating products and rates). Most importantly, internalising registration might also result in a decrease in the space left for a PCO and make it difficult to find a good and reliable partner, locally, with so little margin for profit. PCOs are very reluctant to give up the registration part of the process, and even more so to give up the internal software they have for doing this.

The software choice is a tricky bit in conference organisation because the ESA requires reliable software for the scientific programme (abstract selection), but PCOs (who usually work with large medical conferences, on much larger budgets and with far fewer presenters for the same number of attendees) cannot offer reliable software for this stage and generally refuse to adopt different software for registration. Each PCO relies on their own internal software version, which their personnel are trained to use, for which they already have long-term
leases in place, and which also performs other billing and internal budgeting tasks in relation to the PCO’s more general organisation of providers and personnel across different events. In Torino the technical synchronisation (of registered participants and their scientific contributions) of software platforms (a property-free newly built software for the scope of the conference and the PCO’s own software) was achieved smoothly, but delays persisted in the updating of information on registrations by the PCO in Rome, which were reflected in some organisational challenges with the timely closing of the scientific programme. In Prague the synchronisation of platforms (ConfTool in use by LOC and own PCO software) was achieved ‘manually’ (record by record) by LOC. ConfTool was appreciated by RNs and attendees and proved to work well, although it is not (yet) suitable for automatic matching with PCO software (which is no longer required if registration is being done by ESA in Paris through the same software), though it was complex for the administrator to operate (but the personnel in the company are very helpful and responsive), and it would require some retailoring to adapt to ESA needs (especially joint RN sessions) for the next conferences.

Finally, it might also be mentioned that the organisation of ESA conferences is not undertaken by professionals but by (untrained) academic faculties on top of their (often unchanged) usual duties, on a voluntary basis, with passion and dedication, and in ever changing contexts as a result of the heterogeneous national regulations and practices. Organisers try their very best and are motivated (they invest well over one full-time year of their scientific career in this enterprise and put their own departmental budget at stake as well as the ESA’s). However, they are not trained like event organisers on every aspect (software, communication, design, logistics, laws and regulations, provision of services, billing, etc.) and they learn by doing and facing (not a few!) challenges. Local organisers are assisted by the ESA Executive Committee (the composition of which changes every two years) and by a wonderfully efficient (but often solitary) unit of personnel among the ESA’s permanent staff, who are also in charge of the management of all other ESA administration and membership duties.

In this (learning) process the ESA Executive and previous experiences, together with suggestions by attendees, can make a real difference in improving practices over time.

With appreciation for your reflections and contributions, I wish the ESA and Athens a LOC dream-team and future excited and engaged participants like the ones in Prague!
The Politics of the Academic Agora

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What is the purpose of the academic conference? Ideally, the role of the conference is to provide a space for academics and others to gather in order to debate a topic or theme and discuss the state of a discipline. Through the presentation of work and discussion of ideas those gathered at the conference should learn or have their views influenced by the words and thoughts of others and potentially reach some kind of synthetic vision, consensus, or dissensus around the topic in question. Of course, this synthetic vision may and perhaps should be entirely open ended and provisional, but the key idea remains—the conference should function as a kind of academic version of the ancient Greek agora, where people would gather in order to debate, disagree, test ideas, reach conclusions, and make decisions.

While this vision of the academic meeting as laboratory remains the ideal, and there is probably little doubt that this is the hard core of the conference idea in most cases, there is a sense in which large academic events in particular struggle to realise this pure vision because debate of key themes tends to be dispersed across the conference which becomes something other, more, or perhaps less than a space for democratic discussion. In pursuit of the ancient comparison, we should note that the same was, of course, true of the original urban agora. The ancient meeting place, the ur-space of democracy, was not only about debate, critique, and decision, but also became concerned with trade and economic exchange with strangers. Is this division not essentially present at the academic conference? The conference is a space of debate and democratic engagement, but it is also a professional event for those who present their work in order to update their CV, disseminate findings from projects, and network with a view to career advancement. In other words, the conference is simultaneously a space for friends to enter into true debate and actually engage in open communication, and strangers to exchange cognitive commodities, but never really open themselves up to each other, because self-transformation is never the object of commodity exchange that instead projects the possibility of change into the thing—in this instance, change takes place through the improved CV, for example.

Although it is possible to argue that career enhancement and so on is important in respect of the way it enables academics to find a platform for the communication of political views, it is problematic if the professional structures of

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a discipline harden to the extent that there is no room for the views of others because what matters above all else is institutional position and the value this confers upon particular views. While some sense of recognition of development is necessary, this must be tempered by the need to understand the possibility of the outsider or minority view. The problem is, therefore, how to balance these two aspects—institutional order and extra-institutional potential or politics—in a single space that is both within and external to organisational frames of reference.

My view is that, unfortunately, it is not easy to balance these two aspects of the conference function, which connects institutional logic to free debate, because sociology is, like every other discipline, an institutionalised form, which hopefully lives on through the emergence of new ideas, new thoughts, and new participants. Essentially, it is in this respect that I think that the idealism, or what Habermas would call the communicative rationality, of the conference is fundamentally marked by a more instrumental, or institutional, function which means that the event may be found wanting and appear constrained by pragmatic concerns that mean that true democratic, political, debate never really gets off the ground.

The conference is, therefore, in my view a space of tensions and it is important to note that this is not a problem particular to ESA events, but rather marks sociology, and academic, gatherings across the board. In light of this perspective, which I would define through the idea of the politics of the academic agora, I think it is possible to develop a broad, political response to Bek, Kubala, and Lokšová’s critique of the 2015 ESA conference in Prague.

My initial reaction to Bek, Kubala, and Lokšová’s critique is that this kind of self-criticism is absolutely necessary in the discipline of sociology because it highlights the political tension present in not only the academic conference, but also the discipline more broadly. Unlike many other disciplines, which have more easily adjusted to the neoliberal global hegemon, my view is that sociology has been marginalised, primarily because of its abstract envisioning of social relations that necessarily opens up a space for thinking otherwise. Under pressure of marginalisation, sociology has seen the emergence of branch disciplines, such as criminology and social policy, which start with a broad recognition of existing social structures and then work within these for the improvement of neoliberal society. The critical potential of sociology is, therefore, sublimated in these sub-fields, and the rhizomatic structure of the root discipline itself seems to disappear, simply because nobody knows where to place it in a world where boundaries that enable (quantitative) valuation and measurable impact are essential.

The result of this process of disappearance in rhizomatic complexity is that sociology has become a kind of spectral discipline on the outer limits of neoliberal higher education. This means that it is simultaneously more or less invisible in a mono-lingual system that only speaks economese and recognises isolated individuals who behave like rational calculators of competitive advantage, and also potentially revolutionary by virtue of its key message that makes no sense in the neoliberal universe: the fantastical, utopian, idea that social relations are
irreducible and similarly incomprehensible view that it is impossible to abstract individuals out of their environment. But what is the relationship between this vision of the key message of Sociology, which makes no sense from a neoliberal point of view, and Bek, Kubala, and Lokšová’s critique of the ESA?

My point is very simple. Through their basic assertion—which I take to be that the conference cannot simply be an institutional, professionalised, meeting concerned with the enhancement of CVs and so on, but must engage with wider political issues in a very real way in terms of both its content, but also form—I think Bek, Kubala, and Lokšová are symbolic of the essential political desire of sociology, which will surely prevent the discipline from ever hardening towards a cold, professional, neoliberal institutional form where what matters is position, rank, and so on.

In terms of the particular points Bek, Kubala, and Lokšová make about the ESA Prague conference, I would support the view that exclusivity must be avoided at all costs in order to open the event to young scholars, and postgraduates, who represent the future of the discipline. Where finance is an issue, I would suggest that the entry of postgraduates should be more or less free and their attendance subsidised by the fees of waged colleagues on the basis that we should support the dynamic development of sociology across Europe. Regarding the concern that the conference represents the ‘ivory tower’, and that it should open out to wider publics including policymakers, I would agree that a conference should not become a symbol of the solipsistic enclosure of a discipline upon itself. However, I would note that there is a difference between a critique of the narcissism of a discipline, which means that it is unable to speak to others, and a recognition of the need to provide a critical space for intellectual debate somewhere between the common sense of wider publics and the pragmatics of policymakers where the essential concern is how to make ideas work.

My view is that sociology, and as a consequence the sociology conference, must sit somewhere between these two forms of knowledge which are rooted in practice and provide a space for intellectual experimentation free of habit, tradition, necessity, and pragmatism. In this respect, I regard sociology as a kind of avant garde, and think about the conference as a space of possibility for utopian speculation, which I consider absolutely essential in a world where poetics have been endlessly undermined by instrumental rationality and the demand for quantitative measure—X produces Y impact. For this reason, I have less sense of the problem of the ‘ivory tower’ than Bek, Kubala, and Lokšová and if anything would argue that a secure space free from the intrusion of instrumental, institutional, concerns is essential today.

In order to balance this concern for what we might call a conspiratorial space for sociological experimentation, however, I completely agree with Bek, Kubala, and Lokšová’s view of the importance of social responsibility, but would take this further. Although it is important that the conference itself is sustainable, my broader view concerns epistemological and methodological issues, and re-
lates to my sense that it is no longer enough for sociology to think of itself simply in terms of a ‘fact’-based discipline in a world characterised by a range of potentially catastrophic problems, including economic division, impending ecological collapse, and more or less unmanageable demographic stresses caused by an ageing population and the refugee crisis.

In light of this catastrophic situation, which is not being addressed by the neoliberal elites more interested in profitability and growth than any kind of human sustainability, I think the concern with social responsibility that Bek, Kubala, and Lokšová highlight should really be extended beyond a critique of the ESA Prague event to become about the need for sociology to return to its roots in Comte, who first wrote about sociology, and Durkheim who imagined social science, in order to conceive a ‘new sociology’, or neo-sociological project, centred around an ethical opposition to neoliberal economese and the reduction of people, animals, and the world itself to the status of commodities to be bought and sold on the free market.

Although this may sound like the partisan assertion of a kind of red-green political programme for a new sociology, and some may question whether this normative vision of a discipline is epistemologically sustainable, my view would be that this is absolutely essential. Sociology cannot live on the margins of the neoliberal knowledge economy, pretending to find Durkheimian truths, because neoliberal politics suspended the sociological object (society) and disclaimed its existence in the 1980s. In other words, there is nothing to return to in order to produce ‘facts’ and this means that sociology must take a stand on the basis of its key insight—the individual is made in social relations, power is ever present in these relationships, and the social fabric that holds the individual is founded upon a natural eco-system that is, essentially, our life-support system.

This is what I think sociology must seek to achieve over the course of the next twenty years and the conference form plays an important part in the creation of this oppositional identity. In this respect Bek, Kubala, and Lokšová are correct in their efforts to politicise the ESA event—the conference cannot become a space of commodification, but must serve a wider purpose concerned with the advance of a critical utopian vision for a discipline best placed to oppose the un-dead neoliberal hegemon. Nobody believes in the neoliberal system these days and it is deeply depressing for sociologists to work under this regime that absolutely opposes their mode of thought. From my point of view, silent complicity is no longer really an option.

In the UK, higher education and the university sector is a militarised space which can be understood through Foucault’s work on discipline, governance, and biopolitics. The critical educationalist Henry Giroux writes about the US system in terms of the military-industrial-academic complex and I think we find exactly the same kind of machine in the UK. In this system research has a very specific meaning relating to its use value for the state, while teaching is concerned with the production of trained workers, rather than critical thinkers. Under these con-
ditions, the conference becomes part of the instrumental, industrial, machine. One presents research in order to demonstrate ‘impact’, improve one’s profile, and apply for promotion. However, what I have tried to explain, and what I think Bek, Kubala, and Lokšová touch upon, is the other side of the conference form—the political utopian potential of the academic gathering. It is this potential, this possibility, that I think we need to nurture and foster in the name of the future. For this reason, I think the spirit of Bek, Kubala, and Lokšová’s critique is more important than the content of their suggestions. Inside of their critique of costs, exclusivity, and the need for responsibility resides the political desire of sociology to engage with the end times of neoliberal capitalism, beyond the limited spaces of the institution.
I read the spirited letter by Bek, Kubala, and Lokšová expressing dissatisfaction with certain aspects of the 2015 ESA conference held in Prague with interest and pleasure and a deep sense of hope. Hope because the writers represent the Next Generation, and declared that they believe it is important ‘not to be cynical’, not to slide into the complacent view that things cannot be changed, and to make proposals with the view to improving future ESA conferences. While we the ‘elders’ may look back wistfully on a glorious past, having and articulating visions is what a ‘next’ generation is supposed to do. For the bibliically inclined, Joel 2:28 reads, ‘It will come about after this that I will pour out My Spirit on all mankind; And your sons and daughters will prophesy, Your old men will dream dreams, Your young men will see visions.’ While none of us should ever become complacent with the way things are, the young, especially, must feel and express impatience with the status quo and push for radical change. Sadly too many fall into spaces of either rejection of the status quo accompanied by dissonance and despondency, or urgent rebellion.

The authors take issue with what they see as a discrepancy between the stated ‘main topic and the actual event’, that is, of the 2015 ESA conference held in Prague. The conference was titled ‘Differences, Inequalities and Sociological Imagination’ and the programme did indeed refer to the responsibilities of sociology’s global community’s to confront social inequality. However, Bek, Kubala, and Lokšová are of the view that the conference served to deepen rather than address inequalities because it was classist—expressed by the conference price tag, the failure to engage with the public, and a lack of social responsibility in the services and products provided. Basically the authors see these aspects of the conference as a function of a business-as-usual rather than a radical approach to current sociology and event management praxis. These are not minor or inconsequential critiques.

So here are my responses. I have already hailed the authors’ pro-activism and revealed my conclusion that this is associated with their youth—an assumption I make because they are PhD students. I have noted elsewhere (http://futureswewant.net/akosua-adomako-ampofo-african-future/) while our energies may not be consumed daily with the struggles for a better world, practising our
trade as sociologists means that, inevitably, we engage with questions of the possibilities of an improved version of the current world. For Africanists such as myself, that improved world includes a continent, and her Diaspora, re-imagined in very particular ways within global geopolitics. And so of course I hope for a European sociology meeting that, despite its location and the fact that it is for sociologists in Europe, will pay attention to links with the Global South. And for this reason I was very pleased to have been invited as a plenary speaker on a panel titled, ‘Public policies and solidarity in women’s lives: Comparing regions of the world to feed sociological imagination’, where I spoke on the subject ‘Changing Gender Policies in Ghana: The Journeys of Civil Society and State Actors’. This particular panel was submitted to the ESA Conference Committee by the Research Network RN33, Women’s and Gender Studies, along with RN13, Sociology of Family and Intimate Lives. Glenda Bonafacio and I spoke on women’s activism in Ghana and the Philippines and South-East Asia respectively—a slice of social activism outside the ivory tower.

Which brings me to the charges of ivory-tower exclusivity, academic classism, or perhaps even chauvinism, which the authors see as systemic. The authors wanted to see a deeper engagement with the public, especially around subjects of immigration, as well as greater social responsibility in relation to catering, conference events, and conference paraphernalia. We must recognise that the academy and its appendages such as professional disciplinary associations are not democratic but rather hierarchical spaces. The hierarchy requires that some be at the top (professors, senior administrators, and association presidents), some in the middle (mid-level academics and administrators), and others at the bottom (students and staff). Indeed, it is a club for the initiated. So why would young academics who want to see change even join the ESA or any other such association? Because once upon a time people like them started the ESA and other similar professional associations. Like church, the Lutheranism that challenged the Catholic Church became the status quo. Radical becomes every day. And every day loses its edge. One source notes 37% of young professionals in the United States do not see the value of joining professional associations, 45% reported participation was too expensive, 27% said it lacked proper curation, and 67% stated they would prefer to join an organisation founded by peers of a similar age (https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/246691).

To my peers—those who have been in the academy for thirty years or more—I say that it is critical for us to sustain the relevance of our discipline by re-birthing our intellectual DNA and humanity in the next generation of thinkers. And to do so we need to listen and be open to change, even change that may be considered ‘too radical’. Many of us do not ply our trade within the hallowed walls of the academy, but also take the proverbial ‘gown to town’ and share our knowledge outside the walls of the academy, often in the spaces of popular culture and social media. Some of us have made the persona of the public intellectual so every day. And thus public engagement via diverse media and with diverse audiences is...
vital to retaining the very people for whom we advocate a just world within our fold. At a personal level I have found youth pop culture to be one of the most exciting, and productive spaces to engage on issues of social relevance. To name but one example, Ghanaian Hiplife music has produced a number of artists, some themselves with university degrees in the social sciences and humanities, who provide serious commentary on contemporary social concerns. Elsewhere Clark [2012] has written on Hip Hop as Social Commentary in Accra and Dar es Salam [see also Adomako Ampofo and Asiedu 2012; Osumare 2012]. Reggie Rockstone is generally acknowledged as the father of Hiplife,¹ and both he and Kubolor have songs that speak eloquently and realistically to the migrant experience in the US. M.anifest, in his song ‘Suffer’ notes, ‘If your name is Mohammed or Mustapha/Flying may be harder/My sympathies brother’. In another song, ‘If you don’t love me (let me go)’, Reggie Rockstone places the painful issue of domestic violence squarely in the public domain. In his ‘Songs for Kukua’,² Paapa hMensah, a college student in the US, sings an ode to his motherland in which he upends the sometimes schizophrenic relationships that today’s ‘Afropolitan’³ youth have with their countries of origin. The duo Buk Bak, have a song ‘Akwasi Broni’ (literally Akwasi the white person/foreigner) about colonialism and its contemporary effects, and in ‘Dear Africa’ Ghanaian DJ Blitz teams up with Les Nubians to Blitz raps about Africa’s exploitation and how Africa has become ‘synonymous to charity’. I have used some of these songs, and frequently the accompanying videos, more eloquently than my own spoken word in social activism outside the classroom—issues ranging from domestic violence, to pan-Africanism and racism. A slice of pop culture would not have been ill-placed at our academic conferences.

To the younger scholars, however, I add, that the important project of keeping the sociological imagination alive and relevant means that you too must understand and acknowledge the knowledge, practices, and cultures that built up the discipline and profession of sociology. This means that there will be some required spaces that are ‘exclusive’ and ‘hallowed’; where our concepts and jargons can be tossed about and tinkered with; and where theories and concepts can be debated freely and comfortably in the knowledge that we understand each other and don’t require translation. Thereafter we can unpack them for policy, social activism, and engaging in changing the world.

¹ Hiplife has been variously defined but it can best be described as a musical genre that fuses dance hall, reggae/ragga, rap and even strains of old-time high life, with strong cultural overtures and originally mainly performed in the Akan language [see also Halifu Osumare 2012].
² Kukua is the name for an Akan female born on a Wednesday. Paapa himself is also Kweku, the male Wednesday-born.
References


This is a powerfully put ‘manifesto’ and I am sympathetic to its aims. The problem is one of the political economy of conferences and our limited measures to influence it and transform it into a moral economy attuned to issues of social justice. Since an interest in social justice is at the heart of sociology, we might regard doing so as not only a moral imperative, but something that is about our very practice as sociologists.

But the constraints of the present political economy are serious and not necessarily easily surmountable. Some measures can be quite easily undertaken. The section on social responsibility makes powerful recommendations that could be taken up immediately by the ESA and adopted as policy. However, even here, conference organisers will potentially be faced with problems of the nature of the contracts they are required to enter. For example, in many contexts, access to venues also means accepting the catering contracts associated with those venues. This would be the case for most venues in the UK, including universities. The latter run conferences as a means of revenue-generation through a commercial arm and the venue comes as a package that includes on-site catering. The marketisation of higher education in the UK means that there are no university venues available to conference organisers that charge anything other than commercial rates with commercial conditions (including the use of their own catering services, frequently with outsourced staff at the minimum, rather than a living wage). The American Sociological Association finds some way around this by stipulating that venues must have trades union recognition for their employees and they offer cheaper conference fees by not having catering as part of the conference package. However, this means that conferences take place in large commercial hotels and social responsibility in catering choices is made a matter of individual choice—most delegates go to the Starbucks at the hotel.

But the possibilities will be different in different countries where ESA conferences are held and so it should be possible to draw up a list of desiderata under the ‘social responsibility’ heading, where ‘bids’ to hold the conference would need to show how they are being met and, if they cannot be met, what mitigating factors are in play.

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More serious, however, is that the political economy of conferences is not an external constraint upon professional associations, but something of which they are an integral part. Put very bluntly, the problem is this: associations, themselves, need revenue and they have three sources: subscriptions from members, subscriptions from journals, and conference fees. In order to attract members, the association needs to offer services for which it also charges. The solution is to offer differential rates for conferences and journal subscriptions for members and non-members. But it also needs to maximise attendance at conferences, which it does by offering the benefit of presenting a paper. Frequently, the individual academic has to offer a paper in order to get funding to attend a conference. This has several additional consequences. One is that conferences have tended to get bigger and, therefore, more dependent on commercial venues. The sessions have also multiplied with multiple presenters at each session. And so, the modern conference format is born—keynotes and multiple sessions that become too difficult to navigate except through section membership. This is a format that encourages self-enclosure within an academic and highly professionalised and routinised world.

In this context, it is possible to get media coverage, but the experience of the British Sociological Association suggests that this will be dependent on personal academic entrepreneurship—pithy press releases—and research that can be spun as a human interest story. What tends to get little coverage is research addressing pressing serious public issues. Paradoxically, the media tends not to be interested in keynotes and, indeed, in nothing that they might actually need to attend in order to report on it!

So far, so pessimistic…

But perhaps we don’t need to change the format of the whole conference, or provide it more cheaply. Perhaps we need to charge more, in order to facilitate a conference within a conference; that is, a parallel conference with a different format and one that is free to attend and addresses local communities, activists, and interested publics. What I have in mind is something that has developed at many festivals and that is a bifurcation between the ‘Official Festival’ and its ‘Fringe’. Often the ‘Fringe’ is simply a cheaper, less stuffy version of the ‘Official’ one, but no less commercial. But there is no reason why it should develop in a commercial direction. It could be run as a free event and its costs subsidised by the ‘Official Conference’. Those costs could be kept low, simply because a free-event potentially has access to free venues. Keynote speakers at the ‘Official Conference’ can be asked to play ‘unplugged’ at the ‘Fringe’.

But what makes the Officila/Fringe model work is when they are competing, complementary events. The Fringe can’t be scheduled to take place the week before or after the Official Conference. It takes place at the same time and they share energy. That would mean some of the audience for the Official Festival would drift off to the Fringe, but also that some events at the Official Festival be made open to non-payers. The former won’t really matter because, in the end,
the conference fee is a charge to give a paper and access one’s own institution’s conference support funding! We should not be ‘content with an event that sets self-presentation and networking as its objectives that are fulfilled through participants’ sponsored travel to an interesting city and ostentatious social events’, but we can leverage it for something more.

And now the set of desiderata of organising requirements for an ESA conference would involve not only commitments to social responsibility, but two committees, one for the Official Conference and another for its Fringe.

In sum, not either/or, but both/and. Business as usual and something completely different!
It is my pleasure to reply to the open letter by the Brno PhD candidates about the aims vs practice of ESA conferences, since they ask an important question: Do sociologists 30+ automatically forget about their early dreams and do ‘business as usual’?

My reflection is mainly motivated by the team’s statement about the ‘discrepancy between the main topic and the actual event’. The criticism reminds me of the closing plenary of the Prague ESA conference: At the end of the day (and the meeting) a young scholar expressed his disappointment. He said (in my words), ‘Yes, the invited speeches were interesting, there were interesting papers, you offered a pool of three thousand presentations, but … did you really explain the question raised by your conference topic on one of the core problems of contemporary European society, which is increasing inequality?’ If I had been asked, my answer and, I suppose, the answer of the majority of all listeners would clearly have been ‘No!’. Why are we doing all this if we do not find the answers to the questions we ask? Do we in fact organise a kind of ‘conference tourism’ instead of enriching scholarly debates? Should we therefore apply ‘Less is more!’, as demanded by one of the feedback statements the conference received? Are there ‘Too many sessions, too many poor papers’, and should we introduce ‘More gatekeeping for the admission of papers’? I am sure the intellectual value would be higher if we asked about ten renowned speakers to address the core conference question and if we made all 3500 other participants listen to them. Hundreds of conferences and workshops are operated this way all over Europe every year. It is a widely applied and good practice to organise conferences top-down and produce books out of them, but this cannot be the general idea of ESA conferences. In my view, ESA meetings have to fulfil a different function. Meetings of the National Associations including the European Sociological Association are the only bottom-up spaces. ‘Everyone’ should be welcome—if the quality of his/her work is sufficient. It is the ESA’s job to organise an open space to which all sociologists from Europe are invited and where they can present their actual research and receive feedback (on the condition that a certain level of quality is guaranteed).

However, to my surprise the Brno team does not read the conference topic as a question and does not compare it to the answers offered in lectures and pres-
entations. The Brno scholars do not target the scientific practice and output of the meeting. They are not putting their emphasis on the intellectual content of the meeting; instead, they focus on the possibly exclusive access to it, particularly to the conference party, they criticise the lack of public impact, and they demand social responsibility when it comes to appointing catering services and professional conference organisers. In my opinion, most of these tasks belong in the hands of the local organisers. Only local people are able to select the ‘appropriate’ place for the conference party. Beyond the ‘ivory tower’, only local sociologists would be able to know for whom, when, on what, and in which language a public sociology event for non-conference participants would be relevant. I am sure that our Prague colleagues did consider this, and I am further convinced that all Czech ESA sociologists will have done their best to promote and advertise the meeting among more people in their country than just university sociologists. The same reasoning applies to the selection of appropriate professional services. There are good reasons for passing the ball to the local organisers. Not everything should be decided from the remote viewpoint of the ESA headquarters.

But I will not withdraw from discussing the wider problems that go hand in hand with the questions asked by the Brno team. I will merely raise them in a slightly different way: (a) Is ESA an exclusive club? (b) In which sense can we treat and operate ESA sociology as a ‘public matter’? And, finally, (c) what might enabling the ‘socially responsible’ production of knowledge actually mean?

(a) Exclusivity? The ESA world is flat

For discussing the ‘social’ question of a conference it is important to consider the restricting conditions. For a meeting of more than three thousand participants there is a hard-core limit to everything: The event must not go into debt. The reason is very simple. Neither a handful of motivated individuals nor a local university department nor the ESA could afford a budget minus of, for example, 100 000 euros, a sum that can easily be reached. Therefore the planning requires a safety line. For example, if you expect 3000 people to come, plan your expenses for 2500 participants (500 people are roughly equal to 100 000 euros). It is often claimed that conference fees should be lower (although social science fees are much lower than the fees charged by other disciplines). We receive many e-mails from colleagues who propose that for very good reasons this or that specific group should be granted lower fees—for example, unemployed colleagues, young PostDoc scholars, or participants from countries struck by the economic crisis. All such claims are legitimate, but unfortunately they cannot be the concern of conference planners. Planners cannot think about what would be the ‘fair’ price for one group or another. For planners the financing of a meeting is a zero sum game. Planners know very well that their budget be within, for example, 500 000 euros. If you reduce the fee for one group, you must necessarily increase the fee for another group. If PostDocs pay less, who is supposed to pay more?
What about participants from so-called B-countries and the unemployed from A-countries? Because of this, in my opinion, it is even wise to separate the conference party from the conference fees, as done by the Prague organisers, so as not to increase the average fee for everyone. The main entrance door should be kept as open as possible. This is not to say that the party must be an expensive event. I think the targeted ‘level’ of this event should be decided by the local organisers, which is what indeed happened in 2015 when the local committee (which included colleagues from Brno) selected the location of the conference party.

On the one hand, I am not denying that all this is difficult and that the fee structure of a conference requires careful consideration. Critiques like this one from the Brno group are most welcome because they motivate considering the question of exclusivity. On the other hand, having said this, I propose reflecting on the ‘inequalities’ in sociology in a much wider sense, too. And in this regard, I think, unlike sociology in Europe, ‘ESA sociology’ scores pretty well. The ESA world is flat.

Only a small (but growing) portion of sociology is organised by the ESA. Sociology as we know it is made by influential publishing houses (whose books we buy), prestigious private universities (whose scholars we invite), and admired SSCI journals (for which we polish our reference lists with further SSCI journal quotations). In addition, in some European countries universities, scientific associations, and their conferences still exhibit a feudal structure [Hofmeister 2013]. With slight exaggeration: the club of gatekeepers speaks and the rest are invited to listen. This is not the case with ESA meetings. There are two main reasons. First, jobs are still offered and organised in national sociologies. Neither ESA meetings nor ESA social networks matter. Second, the ESA strictly applies the rule that all decision-making ESA positions (such as Research Network coordinator or Executive Committee membership) must be elected and are given to the elected candidates for a limited period of time only. While in national sociologies belonging still matters for the chances of young scholars, at the ESA level the cards are reshuffled. In my opinion, the doors for participation at ESA conferences and in ESA Research Networks are kept wide open, and there are very good chances that quality matters instead of your inherited social capital.

(b) Beyond the ivory tower: in support of sociology as a public good

Unlike the Brno PhD scholars, I am not sure whether in order to exit the ivory tower the task list of an ESA conference should include ‘teaching’ sociology to the inhabitants of the city where the conference is held. First, the main purpose of the conference is scientific exchange among those who register and pay for it. We should even put more emphasis on this and offer much stronger feedback and criticism to the papers we present. Initiate debates, make the scientific part more interesting! A debating culture should be installed. Second, the wider public should be addressed in the local language. ‘Public sociology’ would insofar be
more appropriate for a meeting of the Czech Sociological Association than for the ESA event. Third, only the local organisers and not so much their ESA colleagues would be able to outline and design a special event like the one proposed by the open letter from Brno.

Nevertheless, the proposal reminds me of a conference I recently attended in India and of another one I will soon attend in Germany. Both national sociological communities follow the strategy of inviting well-known public figures from politics (or the Federal Constitutional Court) to deliver an opening keynote address. Instead of keeping the sociological discourse in our self-referential world, it will be important to think about the symbolic battlefield of society ‘out there’ where sociology strives to matter, that is, considering and doing ‘theory’ in the relational world of practice if we indeed consider sociology a ‘public good’ that is available to and useful for all.

In favour of the latter, on the one hand, the sociology we want should of course be non-exclusive, it should be open to everybody. On the other hand, it has to be relevant and supportive for everybody, against inequalities, against exclusion, a kind of knowledge and thinking that matters, that helps to understand the world and improve life. However, my position is: first comes sociology, then comes the public. Only high-quality sociology will be able to serve as a public good. I suppose most of us want a version of sociology that is perhaps outlined in the ivory tower but nevertheless anchored in society, and, not least, that is worth working for.

Sociologists, of course, know that it is easier to demand social research have a ‘public impact’ than it is to implement this in practice. Following Bourdieu’s [1992: 39] emphasis on the logic of practice, the social world is not a spectacle that just needs an appropriate interpretation. Neither our community of about 300 000 educated sociologists in Europe, nor the bulk of sociological publications, nor of course the ESA conferences are the centre of the world. We should not overestimate the significance of our undertaking with too big expectations. Regarding a more concrete example, getting journalists to report on our sociology event is much more difficult than the Brno authors seem to assume. I was not involved in the ESA’s 2015 press activities; in 2013, however, a team went to great efforts to get journalists we were familiar with from all over Europe to the ESA’s Turin conference on ‘Crisis, Critique and Change’, and had the very limited success of seeing just one national press article come out in Italy.

(c) (Un)Making European Sociology

While I share the view of the Brno PhD scholars that sociology should be ‘socially responsible’, unlike them I will not apply this yardstick to our conference business operations but to the ESA’s core dimension, the production of knowledge. Does our discipline offer socially responsible insights? What kind of knowledge
do we produce (and under what circumstances)? Carrying Marx, Foucault and Bourdieu on our shoulders, we cannot just outline old and new promising ideas about the role of sociology in society. Unlike historians of ideas, the first step for sociologists has to be not so much towards the content of knowledge but towards an analysis of the ‘external conditions’ that enable our knowledge production and determine its limits [Foucault 1971: 22]. My closing remarks will focus on two of these conditions.

My first point is very simple. How do we produce and how do we offer our knowledge? On the one hand, in Europe most of us are financed by the public sector. On the other hand, most of the knowledge we produce is protected by paywalls. How do the two fit together? If we really wish to offer knowledge ‘beyond the ivory tower’—as a public good—we should carefully consider and analyse the current public-private battlefield on open access. There are many pros but some cons in regard to funding, and I would wish very much to have a wide debate on that in the ESA (write to the ESA member magazine European Sociologist!).

My second point is even more challenging in practice. Before demanding a better distribution of our knowledge (than that offered at ESA conferences), there are good reasons to reflect on the question of what kind of knowledge we bring to the meeting. What happens to sociological knowledge as we produce it today? Do enlightened scholars still determine knowledge or does knowledge production already determine us? No matter how heterogeneous 2900 presentations of papers seem to be, do they articulate the European sociology we want? We cannot evaluate so many papers in total, but we can briefly reflect on the conditions of their ‘production’. I will leave aside other forces that also determine the current intellectual state of the discipline, such as the unavoidable pressure toward fragmentation and the language divide between ‘English and the rest’, and focus just on two of the more recent new ‘diseases’: (i) Austeritis and (ii) Evaluitis.

(i) The worldwide cutting of resources for research fosters a need to apply for them. In 2015 the severest cuts arguably happened in Finland and Japan. It is obvious that researchers who compete for funding are under enormous pressure to outline project proposals that fit into a research design that more or less stems from the natural sciences, that is, they need a method and they should preferably propose a test of any self-chosen small part of social reality. Insofar as C. W. Mills powerfully criticised how ‘[m]ethodology … seems to determine the problems’ of sociological research [2000: 57], the pressures for this have increased since the original publication of Mills’s book in 1959.

(ii) In addition, since the logic of the entrepreneurial university has been introduced into the field of universities in many countries [cf. Lam 2010], many of us are subject to the externally steered numeric research assessment. It is no longer a circle of well-educated peers that determines the relevance of research questions. It is the assessment scheme that makes our searching for a small but beautiful specialisation, for instance, a specific part of one of the sociological subfields of our 37 ESA Research Networks. It is the assessment scheme that motivates us
to modify just one of our previously tested variables in order to quickly prepare a promising next paper.

_Austeritis_ and _Evaluitis_ not only allow for content-driven reflections by broadly educated scholars to be replaced by funding-oriented academic self-entrepreneurs. In my view, the conditions of sociological discourse are even worse. They affect the heart of the discipline. In a hidden alliance with the neoliberal power-shift from welfare institutions to individual responsibility, they foster the fracture of such formerly basic sociological categories as collective institutions, groups, and ‘the social’ by motivating methods and specialisation that make us focus on choices, taste, agents, differences, and identities, the agents _ex nihilo_ that also underlie the microeconomic understanding of the Great Recession and its consequences and finally fuel the political ontology of a Hobbesian war of all against all. It will be difficult to propose how the sociological undertaking that searches for, identifies, and sometimes reifies a huge number of ‘Differences, Inequalities (and Sociological Imagination)’ (the ESA’s 2015 conference topic) should be able to guide society and politics in finding a way out of that. If we take a sociological look at the existing conditions that restrain our capacity to perceive reality, the outlook seems to be less promising than our enthusiasm ‘for change’ would like to have it.

However, all that has to be taken as one more strong argument to invest even more in thinking carefully about a version and practice of sociology that goes beyond ‘business as usual’ as criticised by the Brno scholars, and therefore once again I am thankful for their initiative. The next ESA conference will be in Athens in late August 2017. The conference topic will be ‘(Un)Making Europe: Capitalism, Solidarities, Subjectivities’, and a major organisational change along the track laid out by the Brno letter is already in the pipeline, since from now on we will no longer ‘automatically’ outsource the ‘organisation of the event to an international conference provider’. While, in my view, ‘Making’ or ‘Unmaking Europe’ is not so much in the hands of a gathering of scholars, we will definitely try to offer our next ESA meeting with a good portion of ‘solidarity’, as promised by the title of the meeting.

References


Enlisting the ESA—Towards Better Conferences

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Stating that an open letter to an academic association is welcome and well-received might seem self-evident and almost patronising; surely any association worth its membership fees would encourage its members to contribute to an open debate about its structures and events with constructive critique and suggestions! Still, I would like to start by thanking Tomáš, Petr, and Terezie for their great initiative to put their arguments in writing, and hence instigating this conversation. Thank you very much—it takes dedication and effort to voice a clear critique such as this letter does. Several of the points the authors are making in their letter have of course already been discussed in a variety of contexts, in ESA committees, in the research networks (RNs), and certainly also by individual ESA members and conference participants; all the more reason to take them up again in this open and public forum.

I’m particularly grateful for the invitation to contribute to this conversation, as I have been involved in discussions pertaining to several of these dimensions during my time as member, board member, and then chair of the Critical Political Economy Research Network (CPERN/RN06) of the ESA. At the same time, as I am now representative of the RNs in the Executive Committee, I have also gained valuable insights into the ‘other side’ of some of these issues. It is particularly with this RN perspective that I would like to respond, while also drawing upon my CPERN background.

The main dimensions highlighted by the authors are exclusion and inequality, the ‘ivory tower’ situation, and the unsustainability of conferences. It is not my place to comment on concrete issues regarding the sustainability dimension of the conference organisation for the Prague event; the conference committee and the Local Organising Committee (LOC) will certainly be able to respond to these questions in much more detail. Just a few personal observations, as someone who has been going to ESA conferences for over a decade now. It seemed to me that, as the authors also acknowledge, for the Prague conference (just as with Torino before that) considerable effort had been made to ensure that at least parts of the catering would be sourced locally and responsibly, and that the conference materials would comply with sustainability standards. But there is of course always room for improvement. In the bigger picture, as the authors themselves

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write, these might indeed be minor issues after all. But then again they are not, when we think about the impact large-scale international conferences have, with people travelling to Prague from all parts of Europe and beyond, many by plane. The fundamental dilemma of how to reconcile the effects of our mode of transportation and consumption at academic conferences with our awareness of environmental impact and our own subjectivities as progressive social actors (one would assume) would certainly make for interesting research into the sociology of sociology conferences. In any case, it is an issue that should be raised again and again, but can only be resolved (if at all) by each individual conference participant themselves.

Rather, it is with the authors’ critique of exclusion on the basis of costs and inequality and the ‘ivory tower’ situation that I would like to engage in some more detail.

There is no such thing as a free conference lunch? Fees, finances, and equality

The arguments addressing the question of inequality that the authors put forward in the open letter would warrant some more differentiation. There are two issues at hand, as far as I can see: first, and most importantly, the costs of attending international conferences in general, and second, the question of equal access and equity during the conference programme. It is one thing not to be able to participate in a conference because of the costs; whether or not the social programme is affordable is of course also part of an inclusive conference, but at another level, and possibly something that needs to be discussed concretely by each LOC given that it also pertains to location and availability.

The issue of prohibitively high conference costs should be discussed much more often, and much more centrally, in all academic communities. To be fair, in the international academic associations that I am following (mainly in sociology, international studies and political science) these discussions are already taking place, and the respective governing bodies have attempted to respond with differentiated fee structures and travel bursaries for PhD students. Before looking at the financial support the ESA provides, the question of why conferences costs are so high in the first place is of course crucial. And high they are, regardless of which measure is applied. For a non-ESA member from a Band 1 country, for instance, registration within the ‘regular’ period (i.e. not early bird) cost 420 EUR for the Prague event. This is a substantial amount that, given additional costs for travel, accommodation, and subsistence during the conference, can easily go beyond allocated university travel budgets and, if paid privately, constitutes a major financial burden. For most conference participants, it will, however, not immediately be clear just how these costs are constituted, and indeed what they are getting out of paying them other than participating in the conference (as well as the odd conference trinket and coffee). There are of course financial reports, both
for the conference and for the ESA as such; more often than not people don’t look at them, though for a variety of reasons. On top of that, many decisions, such as which catering and conference management services to use, are at the discretion of the LOC. The objective to keep conference fees as low as possible here needs to be reconciled with other concerns such as guaranteeing a professional and effective organisation, putting together a programme that is attractive enough to interest a great range of scholars, and contributing to the overall viability and continuity of the ESA as a non-profit organisation.

From the Research Network perspective, this constitutes a stark dilemma. As an RN coordinator, it is immensely frustrating to see that, at each conference, when registration opens, many people whose papers had been accepted decide to withdraw after all, as they cannot cover the fees. This defeats the purpose of organising inclusive conference sessions and also puts an additional organisational burden on RNs in that they need to manage withdrawals and no-shows. At the same time, it is the overall ESA framework, and in many cases also the financial support, which enables the RNs to do their work in the first place, that is, to bring together academic communities on their respective theme at ESA conferences as well as in the time between them. Most RNs have reacted very positively to the increase in funding that the ESA is able to provide for their mid-term conferences (a maximum of 2500 EUR for each RN); for several RNs this is the only funding they have access to. This would not be possible without the surplus that has been generated through the last conferences.

What, then, is to be done about high conference costs? For the 2017 Athens conference, the issue will certainly be discussed in the conference committee, together with the LOC, as well as in the Executive Committee as such. But I would also encourage the RNs to discuss this with their members and then bring forward their positions in the broader framework of the RN Council—first and foremost because the RNs really are the cornerstone of the ESA, and as such they should be part of the ‘public ESA sphere’ (in addition to the General Assembly) to discuss these fundamental questions. Also, however, since there are many scholars participating in events and discussions within the academic communities of the RNs who are not ESA members. Many of them might simply not find ESA conferences relevant for their work or may have other reasons not to become members. But if there are scholars engaged in ESA RNs for whom participation in the conferences is not possible because of financial reasons, then we need to make sure that we can at least engage with them in the more inclusive settings of RN events. And this includes providing them with a voice in the RN setting, both within their own community and within the framework the ESA provides for RNs. This does of course not solve the question of high conference costs, and to be honest I don’t have a simple solution. For Athens, I’m convinced that the LOC and conference committee will do their best to keep the conference as affordable and accessible as possible.

Within the Executive, there is also a focus on updating the framework for
fees and financial support. As far as conference fees are concerned, the Band 1/2 fee distinction is meant to make it easier for scholars from ‘poorer countries’, as the authors of the Open Letter put it, to cover their conference fees. This is at best a rather blunt instrument, of course. Given the impact of austerity measures and concomitant cuts on the higher education sector across Europe, an increasing number of scholars in Band 1 countries are now facing reductions of travel funding, cuts in salaries, and precarious contracts and working conditions. This raises the complexity of responding to the increased need for financial support to attend ESA conferences; it seems unlikely to me that the ESA would be able to find a distributional mechanism for its limited resources that would help alleviate this situation in a way that could satisfy all constituencies. We are discussing the revision of the PhD travel subsidies now, further suggestions are certainly always welcome! Fortunately, most RNs already have practices in place to support PhDs, early career scholars, and/or colleagues in precarious employment to enable them to participate in their mid-term conferences and other events.

Beyond the ivory towers

The issue of ‘conference tourism’ is one that many ESA members will recognise. You fly into a city, spend a few days at a university, or even worse, conference centre, stay in a hotel with other conference participants, if you find the time use the opportunity for some sightseeing, and otherwise have a few drinks with colleagues in a random bar that you ended up in by chance. There are of course variations to this theme; very few of them, however, will involve contact with local communities, students, or stakeholders. More and more scholars seem to be uncomfortable with these large conference events; the fact that the RN mid-term conferences are so successful is certainly also due to their small(er), intensive format. The challenges of organising a major international conference are already formidable, of course, without trying to also embed the event in a local context. I agree with the authors of the Open Letter, though, that this is definitely an issue where more efforts can and should be made.

Taking the concrete theme of the conference seriously could indeed be a good starting point for such an engagement, in particular with regard to the Athens conference in 2017. The themes for ESA conferences are chosen to set an agenda for debates at the conferences—as conference themes go, they tend to be broad, but at the same time offer a certain trajectory and framing for the overall event. Now, an event under the theme ‘(Un)Making Europe: Capitalism, Solidarities, Subjectivities’ simply cannot take place without acknowledging the complex and cataclysmic events unravelling in and around Greece: the austerity measures affecting the lives and livelihoods of people in Greece, the tragedy of thousands of refugees experiencing the full force of Fortress Europe at the borders, and the helplessness of and divisions between the peoples of Europe over these issues. After all, as the ESA Statutes insist, the ultimate purpose of the association is to
'contribute to understanding and solving social problems, to improving the quality of life in Europe and beyond, and to encouraging peaceful and productive relations among peoples'. There was an outcry when this sentence was taken out of the statutes in a suggested revision a few years ago—all the more reason to make sure its spirit is kept alive and in practice, also at the conferences.

How to go about doing so concretely to a large extent depends on the LOC and the conference committee, since they are the ones in charge of the programme, as well as the location and partner organisations. But this does not mean delegating all responsibility for the local embedding to them, far from it. Once again, it seems pertinent to encourage the RNs to get more involved, too.

As the authors of the Open Letter suggest, one step towards more engagement with the local and national host environment would be a more (pro)active media strategy. This sounds like a great suggestion, although to be fair, how many articles about major social science conferences have you ever seen in your local/national newspaper? But even if news outlets are interested in our events, the next challenge is to condense the debates and ‘outcomes’ of an international conference with several thousand participants into soundbites and press clippings that can be disseminated for publication. Here the conference participants could contribute more actively, through their social media accounts, but also through any contacts they might have to local or online media. Within the RNs, there might be members with ties to media or public figures in a local context, as well as contacts among students, graduates, and colleagues in the host environment.

More importantly still, rather than just disseminating news about the conference, it indeed seems imperative to offer a platform for direct exchange and facilitate discussions between conference participants and local civil society, stakeholders, activists, and actors from public and private sectors. This would require close coordination and advance planning between the LOC and the initiators/organisers of such platforms, though, and would come with transaction costs for the overall conference programme. As an example from RN06, the network board usually invites local activists and includes a discussion event with critical scholars and civil society representatives at the mid-term conferences. When we tried to also plan an event with locals in Prague, however, it quickly became clear that it is rather difficult to organise these things remotely, even though we did in fact have local support. Also, the strict schedule of the conference programme renders it difficult to squeeze in additional events; most RNs are pressed for time for their own sessions and business meetings as it is. These are organisational arguments, though, that should not outweigh the need to engage in these outreach and public engagement activities. Once again, I hope that the RNs will be at the forefront of proposing events and activities that can contribute to bringing the ESA closer to where it is taking place.

1 Many thanks again to Tomáš Profant at the Institute of International Relations in Prague!
To conclude, I would like to suggest a few concrete steps for consideration. I realise that they do not cover all the points raised in the Open Letter, but they will hopefully go some way in at least continuing the discussion.

- For the Executive Committee:
  - Discuss dedicating one of the semi-plenary sessions (or even a plenary) in Athens to a discussion of the relevance of sociology for, and in the context of, the multiple crises in Greece and the EU/Europe.
  - Continue the revision of financial support structures at ESA conferences to make them as extensive and inclusive as possible.
  - Initiate a process that would make the structure of the conference fees more transparent in terms of costs and what they pay for.
- For both the LOC and RNs, consider options to engage with local civil society and stakeholders in Athens, as well as at RN mid-term conferences and other events.
- For RNs:
  - Continue to support PhD/early career scholars as well as scholars in precarious employment in participating in mid-term conferences and share best practices with other RNs.
  - Discuss the issue of conference fees and the relevance of the ESA conference with RN members and share the outcome of these discussions within the RN Council.

In any case, it is very much to be hoped that the intervention of the Open Letter will initiate debates and contribute to the implementation of concrete changes that can contribute to the ESA becoming an even more dynamic and socially engaged academic association.