

**Introductory remarks to the presidential debate
by Piotr Sztompka, ISA President**

The presidential session at this Congress has a bit different format than usual. It is intended as an open debate focusing on the general theme of the Congress: 'The quality of social existence in the globalizing world'. As an ISA President I will only take some twenty minutes of your time trying to unpack the meaning of the theme, to explicate its contents, and to locate it within two current trends of sociological theory. For the rest of the session the floor will be given to the group of eminent theorists whose trademark is not to build theories for theories' sake but rather to use theories in order to throw light on the condition of human society at the beginning of the XXIst century, to understand better the perplexities and vicissitudes of human fate in our time. In their work they reflect on such varied issues as love and warfare, intimacy and labor, risk and trauma, city life and consumption – and many others. At the same time they represent various theoretical 'schools' and points of view. Surely, we can expect a fascinating morning, rich in serendipity.

Let me start with the hidden message of our theme. There is an implicit suggestion that the impact of the huge, overwhelming macro-societal process of globalization with which so many of us are concerned in our work, is to be felt in the *real life of the people, the micro-societal conditions of their everyday existence*. It is reflected both in what people do, and in what they think, for example in the tangible domain of consumption (as covered by the metaphors of McDonaldization, Coca-Colization and the like), and in the intangible domain of ideas and imagination (where the notions of humanity, global solidarity, world moral order, human rights – inform not only sociological discourse but common sense thinking). Globalization turns out not to be an abstract condition of society somewhere out there, but the *very real experience internal to and permeating everyday life of the people*. To see globalization one does not need to read aggregated statistics about financial flows, global division of labor, intensity of telecommunications, numbers of travelers, tourists, and refugees. It is enough just to look around. Thus the theme of the Congress encourages a shift of focus from the tendencies of societies conceived as holistic organisms, socio-economic formations or systems toward *mundane experiences of the members of society*. This is what the people really care about, and there is no reason why the tribe of sociologists should be an exception.

There is a strong (and of course contestable) ontological assumption behind such a shift of focus, namely that what is 'really real', what is ontologically prior and fundamentally constitutive of a society is what we refer in our theme as 'social existence'. The qualifier 'social' indicates that for the human species the central dimension of existence is *'togetherness', living with others, for the sake of others, side by side with others, against others* – but never alone. Therefore the ultimate, constitutive components of society are interpersonal, situated events bringing together two or more individuals mutually related in many ways. The social world is nothing else but an *interpersonal field* filled with encounters, interactions, relationships, social bonds, ties, ligatures, links with others, covering the whole spectrum from love and intimacy to interests and contracts, from cooperation to competition, from peace to conflict, from consensus to quarrel. Society, as the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert put it is an *'inter-human space'*. And the embeddedness of human beings in the relationships with other human beings occurs nowhere else but in our everyday experiences. It is the

central, social aspect of our existence as humans. All other aspects of society, macro-structures, macro-processes, cultures, civilizations, technological systems, organizations, institutions – in fact exist not somewhere outside, but inside social existence, permeate from within the simplest everyday events in which we routinely participate. *Society is not outside ourselves but within us.*

This kind of ontological perspective is a mark of what I would call '*the third sociology*'. The first sociology of Comte, and Spencer, and Marx was looking at societies as integrated wholes: social organisms, socio-economic formations, social systems. And the subject of what they discussed as social or historical change was humanity as a whole. The second sociology of Weber, and Pareto, and Znaniecki was focusing on actions, meaningful conduct of individuals. The third sociology is focusing on social events, episodes actually occurring in a society in particular situations, and incorporating both the agential input of individuals carrying out certain practices, and situational constraints of structures, cultures, ecologies etc. Through a set of concepts the 'third sociology' identifies various dimensions of social existence. Apart from *events*, episodes and their surrounding situations, it indicates typical 'sites' where events take place – the home, the street, the pub, the church, the football stadium, the hospital, the school. It singles out typical, more complex '*occasions*', congeries of events – the wedding, the shopping, the sport game, the mass, the lecture. Apart from actual behavior, or 'practices' it looks for standardized, or ritualized conduct – '*performances*'. It takes into account the flow of time, linking events in sequences: '*chains*', 'careers' and ultimately – 'biographies'. And from the bird's-eye perspective it sees society as a dynamic, fluid '*socio-individual field*' of events, in the course of incessant '*social becoming*'.

Notice that these categories of the 'third sociology', the sociology of social existence seem to overcome the simplifying and artificial dichotomies so characteristic for the 'first' and 'second' sociology, and even to invalidate the very distinction between those two sociologies: sociology of systems and sociology of action. I have always been uneasy about those dichotomies, introduced already by Auguste Comte with the metaphors of social anatomy and social physiology, social statics and social dynamics, and later developed into oppositions of agency and structure, individual and society, biography and history, personality and collective identity, micro and macro-structures and others. All of these oppositions have seemed to me counterintuitive, violating common sense, everyday experiences of the members of society. I have wondered why sociology has to depart so far from the self-knowledge of society. I struggled with some of these dichotomies in my early book *Sociological Dilemmas* (1979). But only now in the concept of social existence have I found the means to resolve them more convincingly and to bring sociology back to the people we write about; their intuitions, their experiences, their practical understandings of society.

The micro-macro dichotomy loses its validity if we notice that, in the most minuscule micro-events and practices which are the texture of our everyday life, there appear limitations and constraints as to what we possibly can do and think, and these are due to the macro-social and cultural structures, which are given in the situations surrounding events, constraining us through the other people present and acting toward ourselves in these situations. How else does the macro-structure of law enter the experience of a speeding driver, but in the action of a policeman stopping him on the highway? Structure and culture are inside events and practices. Even though it sounds like a paradox, macro is inside micro.

The same is true of the dichotomy of action and structure. There are no actions which would not incorporate symbolic, cognitive, normative meanings and orientations

only seemingly external to actions, but in fact infused into them by the actions of other people, teaching, praising, condemning or in short socializing and controlling the actor. Structure enters the event and practice through the interpersonal links with the other people, both in the actual situation surrounding an event and in the traces and records of earlier situations in the memory of the actor. Thus action and structure are fused in the actual events and practices. And this is intuitively felt in all our experiences, when we know pretty well – without being sociologists - that our actions are not entirely free, or arbitrary, but limited and shaped by expectations, demands, orders by others. As Ralf Dahrendorf once put it in metaphorical language: we are banging our heads against the wall of society.

Look at another dichotomy of biography and history. In actual social existence, events and practices emerge at the intersection of biography and history. Our fate is fundamentally dependent on the moments when we enter and exit the flow of history. And it is dependent on what happens at the historical level in between: revolutions, wars, international conferences, economic crises. What it really means is that we are dependent on what other people are doing, particularly in their masses, mobilizing social movements, waging wars, organizing revolutions, signing treaties. History enters into events and practices in which we participate, either as a component of surrounding situation, or the memory of such situations from our personal past. Due to that, history is not outside but inside our biographies.

Equally misleading is the opposition of our individual identity and collective identity. In fact our self-definition, understanding who we are and all attached emotions, are due to the presence of others and relationships with others in our interpersonal field. Events and practices constitutive of our social existence bring us into contact with others, and the way others treat us produce our self-image. In each social situation we look at ourselves in the mirror of others. In effect all that we are depends on who we belong with. This was observed long ago by C. H. Cooley in the idea of the looking-glass self, one of the most precious pieces of sociological wisdom – and one very close to the common intuitions of people as sensitive to the opinions of others, as conformists at heart. Our individual identity is in its content always collective. Separation of the two does not make sense

And finally let us return to this nonsense introduced by Comte, that in society its statics or anatomy can be separated from its dynamics, or physiology. In the texture of social existence, everything is changing, fluid in constant movement. Events and practices, made up of situated actions, are never at rest. They constantly change, have a temporal dimension. This is now a canon of sociological thinking, persuasively hinted by Norbert Elias discussing figurations rather than figures or Simmelian forms, or Anthony Giddens speaking of structuration rather than structures. Social existence is tantamount to incessant social becoming.

Such refocusing of sociology toward everyday social existence has many forefathers. Among the classics we are standing on the shoulders of Simmel, Toennies and Durkheim. Among XXth century thinkers, we follow Mead, Schutz, Goffman, Garfinkel, Bourdieu, as well as sociologically sensitive and sane among theorists of post-modernity: Bauman, Baudrillard, Giddens, Featherstone. The bookshelves of the XXIst century are full of titles mentioning various manifestations of everyday existence: 'Love', 'Intimacy', 'Friendship', 'Eating Out', 'Dignity at Work', 'Distrust', 'Sport Matters', 'Music in Everyday Life', 'The Empire of Fashion', 'Risk', 'Anxiety', 'Shopping Experience', 'Health and Fitness' – just to mention examples from the last years. On a more synthetic and generalized plane, just during the last three years, there have come out three major theoretical statements: the theory of face-to face interactions

by Jonathan Turner, the theory of interaction ritual chains by Randall Collins, and the theory of cultural pragmatics, or social performances by Jeffrey Alexander. The theme of our Congress seems to fit well with this new theoretical turn toward the 'third sociology'; it locates itself at the cutting edge of our discipline. In the spirit of the 'third sociology' the theme of the Congress implies a question: how is globalization reflected in social existence, what are the marks it leaves on our everyday life? But this is only a part of the problem.

The issue becomes more complex if we recognize that social existence is manifested in a great variety of ways. First of all people conduct their affairs in various contexts, or 'arenas': family, work, leisure, religion, education, consumption, recreation. During every day, week, or even more - during the life course, they move among those contexts, modifying what they do, how they speak and to whom, how they look, and even perhaps what they think. They leave or enter different interpersonal fields, with distinct types of bonds, specific forms of interactions or relationships, with different partners, different emotional tone etc. Three questions arise in this connection: (a) Is the variety and plurality of fields in which one participates, or potential options one faces in this regard, a mark of contemporary life, or rather we observe more 'specialized', one-dimensional existence (e.g. typical for those obsessed with work and consumption, or for TV addicts, or for Internet surfers)? (b) Is some harmony of various types of bonds in various arenas of life achievable in contemporary society, or can people attain self-realization just in selected arenas with the neglect of others (could a concept of '*harmonious existence*' be introduced as a kind of parallel to 'sustainable development'?). (c) Can some types of bonds operate as functional substitutes for other missing types of bonds (e.g. privacy and intimacy substituting for rich public life, or spiritual commitments substituting for material affluence, or occupational career as a substitute for unsuccessful family life?). And of course there is the meta-question subsuming all three: how does globalization impinge upon the variety and plurality of contexts.

But variety and plurality of social existence is not limited to contexts or arenas. Second, there are great cultural and civilizational varieties of social existence, different *life styles or biographical projects*, as there are different 'scripts' of meanings which people replay in their social conduct. Do countries differ in the emphasis on certain dimensions of existence, e.g. material versus spiritual, consumption versus religion, work versus leisure, sport versus art, warfare versus peace and security? And again: does globalization produce uniformity and homogenization in this regard, or are there remaining and even expanding pockets of locality?

Third, there are structural varieties of social existence both *within* societies – dependent on material level, age group, gender, occupational category, urban or rural habitation, majority or minority status; as well as *between* societies, manifested in the major divisions of rich and poor, developed and underdeveloped, centres and peripheries, metropolises and provinces, North and South and others. The question relevant for our theme is whether globalization produces ever larger gaps between societies, and between status categories within societies, resulting in growing inter-societal and intra-societal inequalities, or perhaps in some areas (e.g. family, recreation, religion, education) it exerts an equalizing influence?

There is the last ingredient of our theme which may make our debate even more challenging. Namely, there appears the phrase: '*quality*' of social existence. Thus the theme suggests that we move beyond the simple assertions of variety and diversity, and venture toward comparison and evaluation. For example we may ask: which model of social existence is better and which is worse? Which is liberating and which is

enslaving? Which allows for full self-realization and which is degrading? And again, our master question in different guise: what are the positive and negative influences of globalization on the *quality* of social existence? How does the balance look? Does the global expansion of social bonds raise or lower their intrinsic quality and meaning? Is the global span of communication and multiplying of contacts enriching or flattening the meaningful content? Is the decay of autotelic, moral bonds – like trust, loyalty and solidarity – and their replacement by purely instrumental strategic bonds of negotiation and contract - good or bad? Is the progressive privatization of life and withdrawal from public participation – enriching or impoverishing? Is the global trend toward democratization enhancing the power of the people to control their everyday life and fate, or produces a free-riding syndrome, temptation to leave public matters to others? Is the global access to mass, popular culture an asset, or does it, rather, damage more sophisticated, high-brow cultural production?

Such and similar questions suggest that we need some scale to measure quality. And this cannot be done without reference to values, we cannot escape axiological commitments, ethical and aesthetic considerations indicating *which existence* is more and which less human, dignified or degrading, bringing self-realization or mere survival, producing enhancement or curbing of human powers, liberating or imprisoning. Then we also need axiology to reflect about the unequal and unjust *distribution* of these various forms of existence across the world: with huge parts of human population still experiencing inhuman life of poverty, disease, bloodshed, humiliation, exclusion and oppression. Here the turn toward the study of social existence meets with another tendency of recent sociology: *the return to valuations*. The second presidential session that I am convening at the end of this Congress will be devoted precisely to this second current development. Not to preempt the discussion then and there, I will just hint that there is a rising call for opening of sociological discourse to axiology, for allowing and even encouraging open value judgments, visions of good society, rehabilitating the forgotten notion of progress. People are evaluating creatures. Once again, there seems no reason why the tribe of sociologists should be an exception. It seems that only by embracing values sociology can extend its appeal to the widest and most important audience of common people through the new role of a '*public sociologist*'. This is the new recipe for the eternal problem of our relevance.