

**“Solidarity in the Time of Distrust”**  
**XVI Polish Sociological Congress, Gdańsk, 14-17 September 2016**  
[16zjazdpts.pl](http://16zjazdpts.pl)

Report: Grazyna Skapska and Anna Horolets

**Polish Sociological Congress** is a cyclical event of the **Polish Sociological Association**, recurrent since 1956. Its sixteenth edition was hosted by the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Gdansk. The Congress motto **“Solidarity in the Time of Distrust”** called for the reflection on the state of contemporary societies and sociology as a discipline. It proved to hold strong symbolic implications for over 1000 participants from Poland and abroad who gathered in Gdańsk, the cradle of the legendary anti-communist movement „Solidarity”. After the Congress, **Jean-Claude Kaufmann**, who had given a lecture on solidarity in couples, spoke of Polish sociology as “young and energetic” and made a link between the city’s heroic past and the prospects for the future of sociology. The theme of the hope for sociology as a socially meaningful practice was a leitmotif of the event, which unfolded in a number of contexts.

In his key-note lecture **“The Dangerous Nouns of Process”**, **Hans Joas** called for the limited trust in grand sociological notions such as functional differentiation, rationalization and modernization. As a result of social change, these concepts not only overshadow and replace the very processes they were meant to describe and explain but also – and more dangerously – narrow down our sociological imagination. The ensuing discussion by Andrzej Rychard and Hella Dietz was revolving around the need for a theoretically grounded sociology.

The plenary session **“Fractured Society”** was a showcase of the empirical sociology’s strength. Henryk Domański pointed out that despite media reports to the contrary, Polish society is not fractured at the level of social structure and the socio-economic cleavages are not deepening; rather the society is divided at the level of life style and discourse, as Marek Czyżewski also noted, while, according to Radosław Markowski, people were unable to recognize their group interests and create strong group identities, including political identities.

As in previous years, the competing models of sociology were discussed, with one plenary session fully dedicated to the **public role of sociology**. An NGO activist Kuba Wygnański enthusiastically called for being with people instead of producing knowledge about them, while Radosław Sojak suggested sociological imagination should be better cultivated and shared with society, starting from school education. This stance was echoed in the closing session of the Congress **“Not in My Backyard?”** by Cezary Obracht-Prondzyński and Anna Giza who appealed for making sociological knowledge useful for social practice. The session on public sociology turned into a site of sociology in action too, when one of the male members of the public and the ISA President Margaret Abraham expressed their vocal disapproval of the fact that there was no woman among the sessions’ six speakers.

The Congress was an exercise in changing **sociology as social practice** in small but meaningful ways. Academic titles were not included in the program (which is still a common practice in Polish academia). Younger scholars were more visible at the Congress as co-creators of its program, panel organizers and new networks founders. The event attracted more people from outside the academic world (social activists, businessmen, politicians and journalists) than previously. The sessions were held not only at the University of Gdańsk, but also in the historically and culturally important public places such as European Solidarity Centre or the Shakespeare Theatre.

It was uplifting to see over fifty young sociology students and graduates getting involved in the Congress as **volunteers**. Thanks to their social skills and engagement the plenary sessions and symposia as well as 90 thematic panels and 30 accompanying events of the Congress were running smoothly. While making the Congress happen, some of them were practically testing what it means to be a sociologist in Poland.

Let us meet again in **2019** in **Wrocław**, where the seventeenth edition of the Congress will take place.

### Some Photos





