

## Latest News on the Sociological Theory Section of the Czech Sociological Association



As a member of the Czech Sociological Association, on 16 March 2018, I took an opportunity to participate as a passive observer at a colloquium at Masaryk University in Brno organized by the Sociological Theory Section. The section is an important part of the Czech Sociological Association and, along with others (Sociology of Medicine, Health and Illness Section, Sociology of Religion Section), has contributed to an advancement of Czech sociological theories, and sometimes also, it helped to explain importance for empirical research. To be more specific, each paper from eight sociologists (Csaba Szaló, František Znebežánek, Martin Hájek, Jiří Šubrt, Dilbar Alieva, Jakub Mlynář, Markéta Sedláčková, Miroslav Paulíček) explored the relevance of sociological theories in the twenty-first century, focusing on diverse aspects of their individual currents. The papers were complemented by frequent commentaries and questions from the audience, which was composed of Czech and Slovak sociologists as well as representatives of a variety of institutions, such as the publishing house Slon, and several research institutes.

(1) Csaba Szaló, author of dozens of scholarly articles and books on various sociological topics (issues of European identity politics, transnationalism and criticism of methodological nationalism, the transnational symbolic world of migrating women) titled his reflections 'The Cultural Sociology between Hermeneutics and Critical Theory; cultural sociology is not only a theoretical perspective but also an intellectual movement'. He advanced the thesis that sociological texts' perspectives can be divided into two basic categories. The first is composed of normative texts that order the readers what to do, how they should think or express themselves, while the second can be characterized as dialogical texts that appeal to and invite the reader to debate. Csaba Szaló has also analyzed texts that readers have considered to be central or relevant to problem solving and understanding signs or events in various contexts referring to the past, and attached importance to epistemic theories in the field of cultural anthropology; i.e. the contradiction between the substantial influence of texts and theories in our minds and reference to the world of a past that is inaccessible to us.

(2) In the paper 'The Role of Theory in Surveys of the American Journal of Sociology 2001–2017', based on several books about social movements, František Znebežánek explored the employment of theoretical perspectives in scholarly articles carried by this periodical that is contained in prestigious world databases. In the introduction to the paper, it is pointed out that the American Journal of Sociology specializes in empirical research rooted in quantitative research strategies and quantitative research methods. Numerous articles have been published in the pages of the journal, not only by American sociologists but also by experts from other countries, and the journal is considered to be a top-ranking publication and a rich source of information. The analysis drew on various publications of the American Journal of Sociology in the period 2001–2017 and the sample comprised a random choice of articles; each of the seventeen years was represented by one issue. To put it more precisely, František Znebežánek managed to analyze 102 scholarly articles and his analysis of the employment



of theoretical perspectives covered 17 percent of all the studies in the given period. The conclusions of the inquiry pointed to the fact that the methodological premises of articles published in the pages of the *American Journal of Sociology* 'don't stand on the shoulders of giants like Merton' but can be characterized as generalizing relevant experiences from a more or less restricted area of social life.

(3) In his reflections titled 'How to Teach Sociological Theory', the experienced university lecturer Martin Hájek emphasized the fact that B.A. as well as M.A. students of sociology are very often doubtful about the practical aspects of sociological theories; many of them think that presentations of sociological theories at scientific conferences are useless projects. Given students' perceptions of sociological theories, Martin Hájek stressed his personal conviction that sociological theories are the ultimate goal of sociological research and he discussed his own pedagogical experience to explain the capacity of sociological theories to elucidate the world around us and to increase professional group self-assurance. He argued that undergraduate lessons focusing on sociological theories should be guided by several principles: (1) theories as the simplification of social events and reduction of their complexity; (2) mastering of theoretical perspectives brings about a subjective feeling of comprehension of sociological texts as well as of social mechanisms; (3) compared to esoteric teaching, one can adopt, retain and employ them; (4) theories generate ideas and don't result in their suppression.

(4) In his paper 'Towards Some Aspects of Construction of Social Reality: How to explain the linkage between micro-levels and macro-levels of social reality', one of the leading specialists in the field of sociological theory, Jiří Šubrt, focused on issues relating to social reality that were neglected by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann. He suggested that current theoretical reflections deal with the issue of social actors' influence only at the micro-level by exploring individual streams of social constructivism. On the other hand, sufficient attention has not been paid to the issue of how actors can be influential at the macro-level, as a result of their privileged position in the social hierarchy. More specifically, the duplex structuration of sociology and the interconnection between micro-level and macro-level makes visible the unequal position of individual actors in social structures: due to their elitist and monopolistic position, certain influential actors can impact on macrostructures by the introduction of a specific layer of rules deriving from their personal characteristics, specific ways of actions, visions, ideas, and deviations.

(5) Dilbar Alieva, the author of many sociological articles and books (on such topics as social constructivism, phenomenology, Marxism) metaphorically named her paper 'The Plurality of Sociological Theories' and emphasized the fact that sociology in the 21st century has been negatively affected by the coexistence of many theoretical schools, currents and paradigms. Moreover, the advancement of theoretical sociological perspectives has been impeded by ideological conflicts among them and this conflictual *modus vivendi* could be compared to the Star Wars. These processes, which endanger sociological unity and bring about recurrent crises in the field of sociological theory, have also been supported by an artificial exaggeration of the negligible or subtle conceptual differences in the historiography of sociology. Dilbar Alieva argued that sociologists should not regard sociological theory as a set of com-

petitive paradigms; it should rather be seen as a unit composed of various elements. In other words, sociological theory should be seen or conceptualized as a complementary or parallel entity comprising various theoretical perspectives where each specific theory fulfils its individual cognitive function vis-à-vis mainstream sociology and focuses on analyses of social structures and their changes. For example, while postmodern sociology has the capacity to search for and identify new social phenomena, various schools of Marxism can be useful for an explanation of radical political changes.

(6) A lecturer at the Sociology Department of Charles University, Jakub Mlynář, titled his deliberations 'The Tension between Body and Spirit' and, on the example of current phenomenological sociology, argued in favour of a rift between the material world of corporeal practices and the spiritual world. The distinction between the material world of corporeal practices and the spiritual world has become a key element of the European tradition of thought since the Renaissance, and has remained an important constituent part of sociology until today. The core of Mlynář's argumentation concerns the Cartesian contradiction between the flesh and the spirit as it is conceived in the 21st century by those brands of sociology that have been inspired by phenomenology. He also made efforts to prove that current phenomenology has had a substantial impact on the philosophy of mind, psychology and cognitive science as well as research in the field of anthropology, focusing on the corporeal and spatio-temporal aspects of social interaction; the context also highlighted the consequences of the dualism of the spirit and the flesh for the current state and evolution of sociological theory.

(7) The paper by Markéta Sedláčková, a lecturer in the Sociology Department of Charles University, is called 'The Contribution to New Economic Sociology: the Example of the Theory of Confidence' and made efforts to bridge the two social scientific disciplines and different approaches to the investigation of sociality. She drew on the rational choice theory that considers individuals to be rational actors pursuing their personal benefits and, at the same time, she pointed to the limits of theoretical perspectives for the description of human action, which result from their disregard of the irrational elements of actions. Markéta Sedláčková demonstrated the significance of the new economic sociology on the example of the theory of confidence; the conceptualization of confidence through the perspective of rational action reduces it to a calculation of risks, calculation of potential costs and returns on profits. On the other hand, some representatives of economic sociology have made efforts to identify irrational elements in the concept of confidence and have considered them to be norms or a source of motivations. Sedláčková argued that irrational elements not only represent a bridge between rational and irrational constituents of human action but also enable for an interconnection between cultural structures and rational actors as well as a desirable linkage of micro and macrostructures.

(8) The last paper at the conference was called 'The New Sociology of Art' and was presented by a specialist in the sociology of art, Miroslav Paulíček, who is known as an opponent of mass culture and an advocate of Adorno's conceptualization of high and low culture. To put it differently, in the framework of the current state of social sciences, Adorno's and Paulíček's theoretical perspectives are minor and they are in





conflict with the widespread postmodern current; according to authors of various postmodern currents, the dichotomy between high and low culture should be either exposed to criticism or completely rejected. Paulíček further argued that the rejection of the division of culture into high and low can be seen as a denial of social reality and he positively assessed changes in the field of the sociology of art that took place after 2000. Paulíček emphasized the contributions of Eduardo de la Fuente who came up with the notion of 'a new sociology of art'. This has been characterized by finding its proper place among alternative artistic fields and has gone beyond the simple association of artistic products with their respective social environments; artistic products are seen as distinctive actors, having their influence not only in the world of art but also beyond it. He also appreciated the intellectual heritage of Tia de Nora, who conducted research on 'arts in action' and also emphasized links between social structures and art production.

It can be concluded that each individual paper presented at the colloquium should be seen as an original intellectual output of long-term research in distinct sociological fields and theories. One partial flaw in the conference was a fragmentation of the topics; (1) the role of sociological theories, (2) an analysis of *The American Journal of Sociology* 2001–2017, (3) pedagogical experience with sociological theories, (4) the link between macrosociology and microsociology, (5) sociological unity and specific paradigms, (6) the distinction between body and spirit, (7) the conceptualization of the theory of confidence, and (8) the reconstruction of art theories. Because of the negative aspects of the discontinuities between individual presentations, the organizational committee of the Sociological Theory Section of the Czech Sociological Association decided to unify the topic of contributions for the next colloquium, which will be on the importance of the intellectual heritage of the German philosopher and sociologist Georg Simmel for current macro-sociological and micro-sociological research.

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