

# CONFERENCE REPORTS

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## 39<sup>th</sup> WORLD CONGRESS OF THE INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF SOCIOLOGY CONFERENCE REPORT

**The spirit of the 39<sup>th</sup> World Congress of the International Institute of Sociology:  
Can sociology arrive at a reformulated understanding of dilemmas of humanity in  
the contemporary world?**

The 39<sup>th</sup> World Congress of the International Institute of Sociology (IIS) took place at Yerevan State University, Yerevan, Armenia during 11-14 June 2009. The theme of the Congress was “Sociology at the Crossroads”. As mentioned by the Conference Organizers, the Congress in Yerevan had the same spirit of the five previous World Congresses of the IIS, which aimed at highlighting the dilemmas of human existence and societal institutions in the contemporary world. As usual, the encounter of various theoretical approaches among the members of the international community of sociologists was also one of the leading objectives of this Congress. Sociologists from more than forty countries participated to the Congress and more than eighty sessions were held.

The organization of the 39<sup>th</sup> World Congress, specifically in Yerevan was an indication of a search for the extension of sociological dialogue to new issues and regions of the world. Organizers have clearly expressed that the realization of the IIS Congress in Armenia was a conscious decision. It was mentioned in the opening presidential session that Armenia has been at the crossroads of civilizations. It is important to remind that historically, the Caucasus has always been a region where different Empires’ interests clashed, with a long history of conflicts and wars. It is possible to argue that nothing much has changed nowadays.

Currently, global actors are competing for power in the region, while regional actors are also trying to increase their influence. However, it is essential to realize that both global and regional actors determine their strategies by limiting their considerations to short term strategic and economic interests. They mostly ignore historical and sociological aspects and data. Such a myopic view is a high risk in a region in shaping. As known, the collapse of the Soviet Union caused the formation of new nation-states and a revival of nationalism during the process of national identity formation. Since the collapse,

these newly independent republics experienced a complicated transition period. Referring to Durkheim, this was defined by some colleagues as a situation of *anomie*.

In several sessions, many scholars have underlined the strategic importance of the region and the significance of Armenia and other countries of the region. Thus, the establishment of security and stability should be the main objective, not only for the benefit of the countries of the region, but also for the benefit of global actors. The new shape of the region will be to a certain extent, dependent on the capability of the global actors in understanding the factors that are influential in the region. Such understanding necessitates sociological knowledge. The need for sociological studies was also clearly expressed. Many of them have said that the region is an important laboratory for sociologists.

The following observation was crucial in the discussions: many colleagues touched upon the issue that sociology as a scientific discipline is not quite capable of finding solutions to the existing social problems. Thus, they have referred to the crisis of sociology; the necessity of considering the transnational dimension and transnational cooperation; the need for self-reflexivity in sociology; the need for establishing new intellectual avenues and the need for mobilizing the potential of sociology against eurocentrism and ethnocentrism. It was argued that the relative marginalization of the discipline, which is also one of the main reasons for its weakness in finding solutions to social problems, is due to this crisis. It was also indicated that sociology has lost, to a certain extent, its imagination and its potential to predict the future. Thus, sociologists have to rethink their discipline, think globally and develop a strong interdisciplinary engagement, which will render prediction and warnings about the future possible.

Within this framework, some colleagues have mentioned the weakness of the link between sociology and politics, or in other words, between sociologists and those in the position of decision-making. Related to this weakness, some have complained about the inefficient use of sociological knowledge for the well being of human societies. It was pointed out that sociologists can build bridges between different communities and can contribute to the resolution of certain conflicts, provided that their views are taken into serious consideration by those possessing the political power.

Sociologists can mobilize their knowledge and work together on new projects aimed at extending the sociological dialogue among the members of the transnational community of sociologists. It is important to consider the extension of a sociological dialogue to new regions of the world, and the potential of collaborative works among sociologists of different regions of the world. Such a dialogue has the capacity to develop new understandings with the help of a self-reflexive attitude, which will end the crisis of sociology.

Relatedly, the vitality of grasping the transnational dimension, which requires a transnational collaboration among the sociologists of different societies and regions of the world, was also among the main ideas expressed. In that perspective, the 39<sup>th</sup> World

Congress of IIS that took place in Yerevan was an important activity that made possible the encounter of sociologists from different countries. These included scholars from Armenian diaspora and from Armenia, Turkish scholars, scholars from many western European countries, from the US, as well as scholars from Africa, Iran, post-Soviet republics and Eastern Europe. This time in Yerevan, although from different cultural, ethnic, and ideological backgrounds, the sociologists' capacity to speak the same language and their potential for academic collaboration, was an impressive sight to witness.

In addition to the academic dimension, this Congress in Yerevan had also, for some colleagues, a personal and emotional dimension. It was a very good occasion for those sociologists from Armenian origin living in different countries to visit their historical homeland, including sacred places like the Saint Etchmiadzin Cathedral, which is the spiritual centre of all Armenians. As known, Etchmiadzin maintained its central role throughout centuries for Armenians independently of the residence of the Catholicos who moved to another place between 484 and 1441. Etchmiadzin continues to play a consolidating role for the Armenian nation and especially for the Armenian diaspora. I had the opportunity to observe that, for many scholars from the Armenian diaspora, this visit to Armenia had a very symbolic meaning.

My own experience as a Turkish sociologist was quite promising. The hospitality and gallantry which are specific to the region and especially to the South Caucasus were the most impressive characteristics that need to be highlighted. After having learned that it was impossible to enter Armenia with a Green (Official) Passport that Turkish civil servants possess, except official visits, I contacted the conference organizers in Armenia. The problem was immediately solved with an invitation letter from the Armenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which gave me the possibility to enter the country without a visa. The Congress provided me with the opportunity to meet Armenian colleagues from Armenia including the president of the Armenian Sociological Association, who were very welcoming and ready for academic collaboration with Turkish sociologists. It was also thought-provoking to discern the relative differences between the attitudes of colleagues from Armenia with whom I felt that I share many cultural elements, especially as a Turkish citizen having roots in the South Caucasus, and those from the diaspora, the latter being more distant. However, it was equally thought-provoking to experience the power of personal interaction, which in most cases, wipes out this distance. Outside the congress hall, in shops, restaurants and museums, the people who were from where I come, did not change their attitudes when I said 'from Turkey'. In some cases, they hesitated for few seconds and then, continued to behave in the same manner. Thus, officially, academically, and also as a Turkish tourist walking in the city, I did not experience any negative attitude during my six-day visit.

Despite many conflicts related to issues having their sources deep in history, I had the opportunity to observe, especially among Armenian scholars, a belief in sociology in action, to construct a better future for all of us. While discussing with them, I have observed a readiness to come together and work together on topics of common interest. Through

sociological projects, it may be possible to generate collaborative bonds between sociologists from Armenia and Turkey. I had also the impression that such collaboration is possible on an entirely academic basis which will hopefully have political consequences and without sharing the same thesis about events of the past, requiring however, a sincere respect to each others' views. It is clear that such a new and challenging understanding which will take as starting point the accord signed in Zurich on October 10, 2009 between Armenia and Turkey, will definitely facilitate a large-scale collaboration between the sociologists of both societies. This will be most probably followed by institutional collaboration in the near future. This requires the courage to interact, to be ready for debates, and to large-scale collaborations among the sociologists of Armenia and Turkey. Such a large-scale academic initiative has to begin with an entirely new understanding and may be a good starting point aimed at contributing to the normalization of relations between the two societies. If realized, it can be an excellent example for other cases of conflict.

The development of relations among sociologists of both countries, who are capable of understanding the perceptions of different groups and nations, can contribute to the rapprochement between the two countries, by preparing mechanisms for exchange of thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and beliefs among people of both societies. It is vital to realize that the signing of the accord in Zurich between Armenia and Turkey is about the political dimension of establishing relations, once ratified in the parliaments of both countries. This is not necessarily enough for the normalization of the relations at the societal level. At this point, sociologists, as intellectuals operating outside the government, may play a role and they may mobilize their creativity and potential in reconciliation and in contributing to the development of democracy. The support of the intellectuals, academics, and non-governmental institutions of both societies is vital for the success of the above-mentioned political initiative.

As it is essential to realize that it is not possible to solve any conflict without the consent of the people involved, the re-establishment of trust between the two nations is essential. Sociologists have the potential to contribute to this re-establishment. They may also issue warnings concerning the chauvinistic nationalism and the formation of a destructive national identity. These characteristics of sociology, which was in fact present in the very formation of the discipline, should be developed with the help of self-reflection, as already mentioned, and will allow sociologists the possibility to revive their creativity and imagination.

I strongly believe that creating an atmosphere of scientific dialogue among Turkish and Armenian sociologists and discussing the ways sociology can arrive at a reformulation of an entirely new understanding that will put aside the old rhetoric is possible. An inclusive collaboration among sociologists and 'sociology in action' have the potential to contribute to the normalization of the relations between Armenia and Turkey, and to re-establish trust between the two nations. It is within this framework of reference that I have decided to share my observations, impressions and views as a sociologist.