

# **Societies under Tension**

**40th Congress of the German Sociological Association**

**Berlin, Technical University, 14.-18.9.2020**

The 40th Congress of the German Sociological Association (DGS) in Berlin „Societies under Tension“ focuses on societal tensions, conflicts, diagnoses of the re-ordering of societies and the corresponding challenges for sociology as a social science.

## *Tensions*

Social tensions have intensified considerably in recent years at the national, regional and global levels – and they have also become much more salient in our everyday lives. This applies, for example, to the growing gaps in society, such as that between rich and poor and its consequences, the growing tensions between political positions and ideologies, between religions and cultural forms, between nations, regions and transnational organizations that are (again) becoming stronger, between society and nature, between city and countryside, between generations and not least between the genders. Global socially-induced climate change, demographic change, migration movements, a globalized and borderless capitalism as well as the transformations in the structures of social inequalities associated with it, also contribute to a society under tension. These tensions can be problematic and existential – for example in terms of inequality, exclusion or violence. Yet, they can also become dynamic forces driving the development of complex societies in ways that allow for an expansion of freedom and reflection. Societies without tensions are virtually inconceivable. Their current aggravation and also the changing capability to deal with tensions – this is what distinguishes our contemporary society and requires rigorous sociological observation.

These tensions are not restricted to certain areas or issues, but seem to be linked to specific large-scale developments. On the one hand, we are currently confronted with complex and by no means unilinear processes of globalization, transnationalization, and the blurring of boundaries between structures, identities, and communities, which call into question what has previously been taken for granted, therefore demanding new descriptions of society. On the other hand, these transgressions, escalations and losses of security are triggering new dynamics that react with closures as well as emphasizing and reforming boundaries, rigid structures or fixed identities: “Economic nationalism”, shifting the locus of power back to the nation-state and reinforcing borders not only in Europe, the new autocracies all around the world, the emphasis on local, regional and national communities, and the increasing intensity of discourses against gender and sexual equality are just a few examples of dynamics that seek to counter the expansions, delimitations and openings of social orders with closures, demarcations and exclusions. But also new forms of transnational solidarity as well as more complex discourses and forms of action, for example in digital activism (e.g. #MeToo or #MeTwo), young people’s protests against climate change and a form of politics that lacks an orientation towards the future, the worldwide ecological movements or the commitment of civil society to migration and integration issues as well as against racism are part of the dynamics in the context of intensified tensions.

These disparate tendencies form the background for complex social conflicts across all dimensions of society: How plural, how integrated, how capable of conflict resolution, how (un)equal and how mediatized can society be in order to deal with such tensions as non-violently as possible? How do public discourses about, for example, ‘parallel societies’ express ideologically justified divergences, how are such tensions negotiated within the media, in language and in interactions? Do new forms of participation allow for more inclusion and equalization? Or, in contrast, do they promote the fragmentation of identities? How do people, organizations or the media deal with casualization and growing urban-rural disparities or with the increasing opportunities for experiences of difference that can be processed in completely different ways?

Social tensions, their challenging dynamics and even the potentially fruitful disorder are being reinforced by the current digitalization process, which increasingly permeates all areas of society and is leading to the mediatization of communicative action, the refiguration of social spaces and the acceleration of social processes. Digitalization not only changes the media communication system, but also affects all forms of work and, thus, the entire economy, the public, politics as well as social relations, religious communication, the arts and, last but not least, also science. Digitalization leads to new forms of mediatization of human communication and therefore raises fundamental questions about the limits and extensions of the social world: How do social relations change through digitalization? What role does artificial intelligence play in human contexts? And what are the consequences of digitized data and “big data” for the exercise of power and social control?

Berlin, the formerly divided city and venue of the Congress, has been historically shaped by social tensions. Thirty years after the unification of the city, the above-mentioned phenomena can be found here in a particularly concentrated form, here they can be experienced in their diversity, and here they also become the subject of multifaceted sociological research. This research examines socioeconomic differences, segregation or gentrification as well as the consequences of social transformation, which still raises the question of the differences between East and West Germany in Berlin 30 years after the fall of communism. Moreover, the fact that it has been 40 years since the German Sociological Association last held its Congress in the city also underpins the thematic framework for the specific focal topic. The 40th Congress of the German Sociological Association will address the ways in which tensions, conflicts, and power struggles are manifesting. The Congress invites academics to present and discuss empirical studies, theoretical ideas, and diagnoses addressing the tensions in society.

**Therefore the Congress aims, first, at describing, analyzing and explaining social tensions in the most diverse circumstances that constitute contemporary societies: between groups of various kinds, cultures and milieus, organizations, professions and institutions, individual actors and in interactions, their spatial, temporal and communicative aspects, in questions of power and inequalities as well as the role of politics, technology, media, knowledge, language, art and other fields of sociological research.**

### *Diagnoses of Re-ordering*

Increasing tensions, not least catalyzed by digitalization, are creating the impression (which itself needs to be verified) that today’s society is in a state of upheaval, in a state of reorganization. How society copes with these tensions, it attempts to handle them, or even reduce tensions and to generate cohesion, is leading to changes, new (also political) constellations and refigurations that are assuming the character of a far-reaching transformation with what is still an open outcome. Indeed, conventional analyses of ‘modernity’ can hardly still be applied to the description of

contemporary society without ignoring significant changes. The analyses offered by “postmodernity”, the “second modernity” or globalization are also confronted with this challenge. The same applies equally to many other sociological diagnoses that proved fruitful in their time. Moreover, given this background of comprehensive digitalization, it is precisely sociology that must step up to the challenge and ask whether we are facing a fundamental restructuring of society that is leading to a new figuration of our social relationships: Are we dealing with fundamental orderings of society in which social relationships, the relationship of individuals to community groups and societal organizations, the supremacy of the Global North, the relations between the genders, the social relationship to nature, the production of education and knowledge, and other aspects of social relations, structures, and dynamics are being refigured? Which new forms, figurations, or orders are currently emerging? Which rearrangements are becoming visible as a result of the current tensions in society? What role do which utopias and dystopias play in current society? How are mediatization, digitalization and artificial intelligence affecting social change? How is the relationship between society and nature changing?

**Secondly, the Congress in Berlin will focus on the diagnostic question: What form, kind and constitution of society are we moving towards?**

### *Sociology and Society*

Since its beginnings, the development of sociological theory has taken place in the light of and through knowledge about tensions and conflicts as central societal dynamics in the formation of order and social change. Hence, tensions in society also provide an opportunity to reflect on the constitution of sociology itself. As the science of society, sociology also has to ask itself whether and to what degree it is affected by the tensions in society or even helps to produce them. There is a need to deal with tensions between methodologies as well as between theoretical approaches in an open and reflective manner if sociology is to take meaningful advantage of its own plurality and avoid authoritarian closures or negligent arbitrariness. Reflections on the relationship between sociology and society also need to clarify which insights sociology can provide for those social agents who are having to deal with current tensions, or what contribution they can expect from sociology in order to help resolve these tensions. It is about the interaction between society and science, about the relationship between sociology and the public, and about dealing with pluralism and the diversity of approaches in sociology. All these topics also need to be reconsidered in light of the challenges of digitalization that are increasingly impacting sociology and science itself (“Open Access”, “Open Data”, research data infrastructures).

**Thirdly, the Congress will therefore ask: To what extent can sociology, with its analyses and diagnoses, do justice to the tensions and refigurations in society – as a sociology of tensions and as a compelling sociology?**

#### Focal issues and formats

- (1) The Congress aims to address the widespread tensions in contemporary society through special events. With respect to topics such as globalization, (post-)empires and neo-nationalism, elites and exclusions, democratization and populism, climate change and resilience as well as digitalization, the question arises: Which open or latent lines of conflict are shaping the current social order and at the same time challenging it? What are their causes and what inherent power for change do they contain? These questions of fundamental sociological research form the focus of the plenary sessions. We also invite

the sections of the German Sociological Association to discuss these issues in their sessions.

*Forum Berlin:* The particular situation in Berlin will be addressed through a special focus within this first area “social tensions”. This includes topics such as: Who owns the city? Town and country – refigurations in the tension between social spaces. Casualization and gentrification. Parallel societies or multiculturalism? Civil society or totality? Disorder and creativity?

This topic area, which by no means has to be limited exclusively to Berlin, can be addressed through ad hoc groups within the framework of the Congress. Through a special “Call for Curation”, we also invite contributors to offer unusual and unorthodox events on this topic at the Congress. These can also involve the city’s own and other external actors; and they can also be held outside the Congress at different locations in the city’s public sphere.

- (2) Moreover, the diagnostic question of the emerging refigurations forms a second focal point of the Congress in Berlin: Which tendencies of rearrangement can be observed across the most diverse social areas? How do these figurations affect the various social groups, institutional fields and other social spaces? The main focus here is on describing, interpreting, explaining and forecasting key contemporary social dynamics. Sociology can prove its diagnostic potential, which is also relevant for the self-understanding of society.

Alongside section events, potential formats for this are also ad hoc events and plenary sessions.

- (3) The third thematic area of the Congress focuses on the relationship between sociology and society, the role of sociology in the public sphere and the contribution sociology can make to dealing with tensions and rearrangements. Moreover, it deals with the question of to what extent sociology itself is affected by the tensions and refigurations and how, as a multiparadigmatic science, it methodologically and theoretically deals with social challenges and technical changes.

In order to deepen these debates, we would like to bring together representatives of various theoretical and methodological approaches in sociology. This can take place in plenary sessions, section events or ad hoc groups.

Alongside these event formats and the lunchtime lectures given by international researchers, special evening events will address the topics of the Congress in ways designed to attract a broader, more general public.

The congress will take place at the Technische Universität Berlin, but it is being held in cooperation with the sociology institutes of all Berlin universities (Freie Universität Berlin, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Hochschule für Wirtschaft und Recht Berlin). The history, breadth, and diversity of sociology in Berlin is also taken into account through close networking with non-university research institutions (including the Social Science Research Center Berlin (WZB) and the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities).