
A Reaction to the Open Letter to the ESA from the Chair of the Local Organisational Committee

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I have to admit that when I first read the open letter to the European Sociological Association titled “‘Conference Business’ as Usual?”, and written by three conference participants, PhD candidates Tomáš Bek, Petr Kubala, and Terezie Lokšová, from the Department of Sociology at Masaryk University in Brno, the Czech Republic, I felt rather uneasy. The very first idea that came to my mind was something like: ‘Oh dear ... it’s a million times easier to criticise a conference than to organise one.’ But when I’d calmed down somewhat, I realised that the authors of the open letter were asking some questions that are substantive and deserve to be discussed. Then, later, when I was asked by the Editor-in-Chief of the *Czech Sociological Review* to contribute to this discussion I promised to contribute an opinion as one of the organisational insiders. As the former Chair of the Local Organisational Committee I will comment mostly on the practical issues mentioned by the authors of the open letter and leave most of the theoretical or even philosophical issues raised by them untouched.

In the beginning section of the open letter the authors explain their motivation for writing it as their disappointment with ‘the discrepancy between the main topic and the actual event’. Although the title of the conference, ‘Differences, Inequalities and Sociological Imagination’, refers to three keywords, from reading the opening paragraphs of the open letter it seems clear to me that for its authors ‘the main topic’ was inequality. They contrast the topic of the conference with the actual event that, as they say, ‘in no way differed from the (unfortunately) standard style of conference tourism, which is profoundly exclusive in design and serves to affirm and deepen inequalities instead of addressing them’. Later in the open letter they explicitly formulate three aspects that they considered ‘particularly inconsistent with its theme’.

The first aspect of the conference the authors of the open letter criticise is its ‘exclusivity’. They claim that the price of the ESA conference was ‘prohibitive’ and, according to them, ‘excluded people from smaller institutions, poor countries and early career scholars with limited research budgets from attending’. As the Local Organisational Committee, that I chaired, did not make the

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decision about the conference fees (the ESA Executive Committee made that decision), I can comment on that relatively independently. I think that the simple fact that the Prague conference was attended by a record number of 3459 participants (about a 29% increase compared to the previous ESA conference in Torino) does not support the idea of prohibitively high conference fees. I am aware that the price of attending the conference included more than just the conference fee, but even the cost of transportation to Prague and the costs of accommodation or dining in the city were somewhat lower than the costs of previous ESA conferences (local transportation was provided for free by the City of Prague to all participants). Yet, as a sociologist I know very well that, although the overall cost for an 'average participant' may not be too high, the cost could be high for some participants or could even prohibit potential participants from participating. It should be stressed, however, that not all participants paid the same fee. On the contrary, 24 different fee categories were set up, taking into account whether attendants are ESA members or non-members, whether they are students or not, whether they are from a richer or poorer country (we used the politically correct labels of 'A' and 'B' countries), and according to whether they paid an early fee, late fee, or wanted to pay on-site. Thus, the cost of the fee could have been as low as 80 EUR (a student from a poorer country who was an ESA member and paid the early fee), or as high as 520 EUR (a full participant from a richer country who was not a member of ESA and paid on-site). In fact, not too many participants actually paid either of these fees (37 students and 5 full participants, respectively), and the typical participant paid either the full, early, ESA member fee of 190 EUR (912 people), the full, early, non-ESA member fee of 370 EUR (615 people), or the student, early, non-member fee of 160 EUR (468 people).

I must admit that, despite the wide range of discount fees, I personally know sociologists who declined attendance at the ESA conference in Prague and cited the high conference fees as the main reason for their decision. And this I regret. It is also true that we, as the organisers, received some individual requests for special discounts for various reasons which we could not accept as we were bound to follow the agreed rules of the game. But the statistical data on conference participants do not support the idea that only the 'privileged' could attend. Students, for example, accounted for 32% of participants at the Prague conference, which is a noticeably higher figure than at the previous conference in Torino (28%). It is true that the share of participants from poorer B countries amounted to only 12% of the total (a decline of 21% from Torino), but when the data are examined more closely it is clear that this decline can be fully attributed to the simple fact that, owing to rising GDP several formerly B countries had become A countries. These 'newly rich' countries included Poland, Russia, and Hungary. Yet, the increase in conference fees evidently did not prevent sociologists from these three countries from participating. On the contrary, combined they accounted for 13% of participants at the Prague conference.

When debating fee levels and their structure one should not forget something so obvious that many fail to take it into account: fees are primarily collected

to pay for the costs of the conference. As the ESA conference is not a medical congress, where a substantial part of the costs are covered by corporate sponsors (guess whether they do it for altruistic reasons or not), the conference fees are the single most important source of ESA conference revenue, without which there can be no conferences at all. In the Prague case, the fees generated no less than 86.5% of the conference budget, while money from sponsors and exhibitors only 4.5% of total revenue (the remaining 9% was revenue collected to cover services offered to participants—the Congress Party, the welcome cocktail for accompanying persons, lunch boxes, and print versions of the full programme). Although the total revenue of the conference was high in nominal terms, so were the expenditures, which included items like rental of the conference premises (yes, we had to pay for that), rental of the technical equipment, catering and social events (most of which was included in the participant fees), the costs of the professional organisers who helped us to organise the event, information materials and other conference materials, programmes, web, programming, graphic design, mailing, the labour costs of the local organiser, and value added tax (21% on goods, 15% on services). When the necessary costs of running the conference are calculated, it's clear that in fact those participants who paid the reduced fees (like students or people from poorer countries) did not pay enough to cover their share of the costs, and they were subsidised by those who paid the higher fees. Despite this, every participant was provided with the same services at the conference.

There was one exception to the above-mentioned general rule and that was the Congress Party. The last point criticised by the authors of the open letter pertaining to the 'exclusivity' issue was the overly pricey Congress Party, which was held, as they say, 'at one of the most luxurious places on the Vltava River'. I can understand that 40 EUR could be considered quite high a price for a Congress Party by some participants, particularly those who have lower incomes and whose institutions refused to cover such costs from their institutional budgets. Nevertheless, we wanted to provide something memorable for those who could afford it, and we the organisers do not regret having offered participants something like this. I can assure the readers that we considered many different places where it might have been possible to hold the Congress Party, but in the end we chose the place we believed would provide us with the best value for money. Of course, a cheaper version of a Congress Party could have been offered in a less attractive location with less or cheaper food, without music, etc. But maybe then we would have got an open letter from British, German, or Italian professors complaining about the low quality of the services offered. In comments on an open question participants were asked in the satisfaction questionnaire compiled after the conference (1772 respondents, Q: *Please tell us what you liked the most and your suggestions for improving the organisation of the next ESA Conference*) we did receive complaints of this type. One respondent, for example, complained that the transportation options at the conference venue were very limited and no taxis were at the venue. This anecdotal note just illustrates the simple fact that there are huge social differences between the sociologists who took part in the Prague

ESA conference. This is true, but we can hardly do anything other than to offer all types of participants the most of what they want, while bearing in mind that we cannot make everybody happy with everything. Finally, I would like to mention that the Congress Party was not the only opportunity for socialisation. On the very first night of the conference, after the plenary sessions, every participant was invited for a Welcome Cocktail, which provided them with another interesting place to meet, and, thanks to support from the City of Prague, food, drink, and a social programme as well.

The second aspect of the conference criticised by the authors was, as they label it, 'the ivory tower' aspect. They call for more publically engaged sociology and expressed criticism that the conference 'did not actively engage with the public'. Here I partly agree with them; we as sociologists could try to be even more publicly visible. The problem, however, is that engagement with the public requires media that are interested in sociology. The authors of the open letter claim that the 'only connection to the public sphere was one interview with Zygmunt Bauman in a Czech newspaper and a short interview with Gurminder K. Bhambra on Czech public television'. As a Czech citizen I should add for the international audience that this was a one-page article in the most widely read Czech national newspaper (tabloids excluded), and the interview was presented in the most respected and highly watched news programme of Czech public TV. In this respect we could hardly hope for more. Besides that, members of the Local Organisational Committee arranged several other interviews with local, regional, and specialised newspapers and magazines. I personally was interviewed by several journalists during the conference; in most cases these were live talks over the telephone with people from different public or private radio stations. All these activities were less visible so I am not surprised that the authors of the open letter did not notice them. The authors also express regret that the 'outcomes of the conference debates on migration were not presented', which is a slightly surprising statement for me, as I am not aware that such 'outcomes' exist. In fact, the issue of migration was almost the only topic the journalists calling to interview me were interested in. They were generally impressed that so many sociologists had come to Prague and wanted me to comment on this. They then usually assumed that if so many sociologists were gathered in one place they must be able to find a solution to any social problem very quickly (something like the theory of critical mass). That is why several of them asked me basically the same question, whether we (the sociologists gathered in Prague) had 'already solved the migration issue'. I am sorry that I was unable to give them a simple answer to their question.

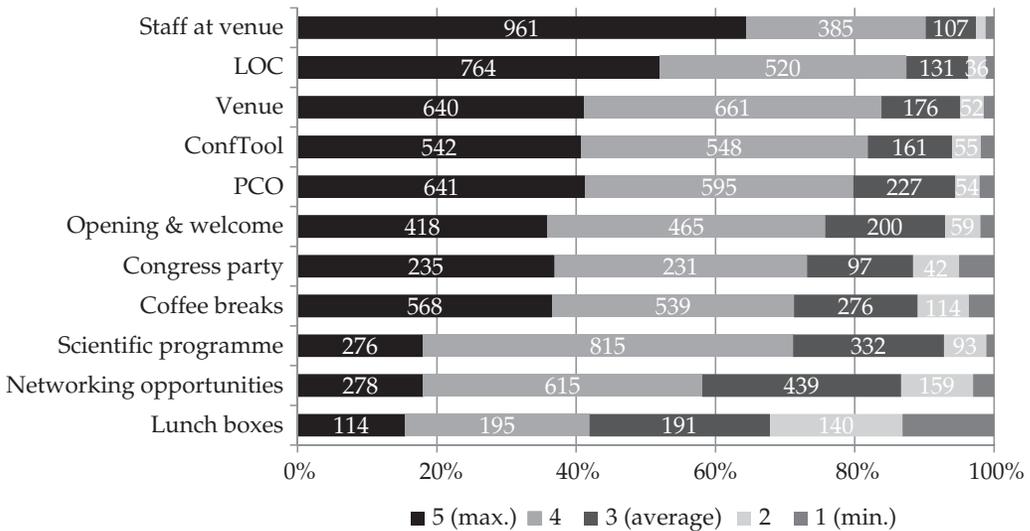
The authors of the open letter suggest that the 'conference could open up more to the public by holding lectures, discussions, seminars, round tables and workshops that welcome the public, politicians or stakeholders'. This is an interesting proposal worth thinking about, but it evidently goes beyond what we usually consider an academic conference to be. From the organisational point of view, I just want to point out that we answered several tens of thousands (that fig-

ure is not a typo!) of e-mails, and we organised 2765 different presentations within three-and-a-half days. We had to organise about 700 sessions of different types, sometimes 70 of them in parallel. The full conference programme had 477 pages (the book of abstracts available only in electronic format had about 2000 pages) and it took several days just to do the editing (under the time pressure we were literally working in shifts, 24 hours a day). Simply speaking, what the authors suggest is theoretically possible but it would be very difficult to achieve in practice without hiring more people to organise the event (which would increase the cost of the conference).

Finally, the third issue raised by the authors is that of social responsibility. They appreciate that 'the lunch boxes were prepared by migrant women from Ethnocatering', but ask 'why this conscientious approach to the event's organisation was not carried further'. Here the answer is simple, albeit not short. When the decision was made by ESA that the 2015 conference would be held in Prague, and I officially became the Chair of the Local Organisational Committee, I felt the extremely heavy burden of responsibility for ensuring the conference's success. We set up a team of committed and hardworking people who started preparations for the conference well ahead of the event. Expecting about 2000 to 2500 participants to attend the ESA event in Prague, we made the strategic decision that, while we would be able to handle many activities ourselves (like organising the call for abstracts, abstract selection, programme preparation, dealing with participants), there would be some tasks we could not do ourselves (like collecting fees, preparing food, serving participants during lunches and coffee breaks, manufacturing conference materials, booking hotel rooms for participants, dealing with visa issues). Although we certainly did not outsource the 'organisation of the event to an international conference provider' (maybe we were working so professionally that in the end the authors reached that conclusion?), it was clear that we would need partners and suppliers who could assume responsibility for those parts of the conference organisation that we were unable (or did not want) to do ourselves. Consequently, the organisation of the conference comprised also dozens or maybe hundreds of business negotiations with partners and suppliers. As someone with only two years of work experience in the corporate sector, I had to admit that I did not feel comfortable in that position. It was definitely not my favourite part of the conference preparations.

Initially I thought that our negotiating power would increase as the number of people who registered as participants rose. This was the case up to a certain tipping point. When we learned that we were going to host not 2000 but probably 3000 or even 3500 conference participants, we came to realise that as the number of participants increased, the number of potential partners and suppliers was decreasing dramatically. In the end we had trouble finding anyone who could provide the service of supplying goods in the quantities we needed. Sometimes I felt like someone who had been given the task of quickly and safely organising a tour for 500 people from Europe to America—whatever you may wish at the

Satisfaction with different items: Please rank...



beginning, at some point you end up negotiating with people linked either to Airbus or Boeing. They know you cannot really avoid them; they aren't cheap, but they are professionals, and they know how to transport large numbers of people over the Atlantic Ocean and have airplanes with a good reputation and solid references. When one is responsible for the success of a conference, you can try to include as many social or socially responsible businesses among the suppliers as possible, but in the end you need to be assured that everything will be done on time and at a level of quality that is acceptable to conference participants. We gave some social business a chance to serve as providers, an example being Ethnocatering, under whose management migrant women prepared the lunch boxes. They worked hard and did their best, but privately, after the conference, they told us that they had been working at the very edge of their capacity. Notably, in the participant satisfaction survey the quality of the lunches was the most criticised aspect of the conference. Whether this was because the lunches were prepared by a semi-professional social enterprise or simply because sociologists like other people tend generally to be more critical when it comes to evaluating food, I do not know. But the coffee breaks served by a 'regular catering business' generally obtained better marks (see the chart above).

The authors of the open letter also came up with some suggestions as to how the conference could be made more socially responsible. For example, they criticised the 'hefty conference programme'. But the full programme book was offered on USB sticks or on-line and the paper version was offered at an extra cost to discourage people from using it. Still, over 800 people bought the printed

programme book. Other suggestions like printing on recycled paper or providing free trade coffee are nice in theory but difficult to achieve in practice. With the time and budget constraints we were operating under we simply could not afford to do either of these things. It would certainly be possible to provide the participants with less merchandise, but I wonder how many conference participants would complain that they did not get what they were used to from previous (or other) conferences. Finally, the authors of the open letter criticise the fact that we offered participants the option to buy 'socially responsible T-shirts' which they claim 'almost seemed a joke in this setting'. Here I must openly say that the 'socially responsible T-shirts' truly were meant to be a joke. Evidently, not everyone has the same sense of humour. But that doesn't matter, as it makes the world interestingly diverse.