



Editorial

In 1996, the Danish Ministry of Education approved a decision from Aalborg University to start a new sociology programme, the second in Denmark after Copenhagen, granting both bachelor's and a master's degrees. By September 1997, the first year of 50 students were admitted to this programme.

In order to celebrate this event, and to launch the programme officially, the university arranged an international conference on *Sociology of the Future*, October 9-10, 1997, with four invited speakers: Sylvia Walby, John Urry, Zygmunt Bauman and Mikael Carleheden, and with nearly one hundred, mainly Scandinavian participants. The speakers were selected to represent various traditions, perspectives and generations in sociology.

The questions for the speakers, and thus for the conference, were: What will, or should be, the most important topics, aims and methods for sociology in the future? How can we deal with this in research and in teaching? How shall we exert our profession in a future global-local context?

The new sociology programme, the themes of the conference and, not least, the contributions, are certainly of interest to people other than the conference participants and the sociologists in Aalborg. Therefore, this journal is happy to accept the offer to publish the revised

proceedings from the conference in this special issue, and to do so in English in order to reach beyond a Danish/Scandinavian public¹.

In his introduction to the conference, the director of studies in sociology in Aalborg, *Jens Tonboe*, discusses possible explanations for the surging interest in sociology in Denmark. It seems to be connected to general feelings of anxiety and unrest in society, often seen as shortcomings of, or challenges to, existing morality and ethics; in other words, as the classical question of order and change in relation to norms and sanctions, rather than seeing it as a matter of 'differentiated morality' and a 'fractioned reflexivity'. Former top-priority issues in sociology such as 'class', 'inequality', 'structure', 'macro' and 'quantitative methods' have faded and made way for issues as 'identity', 'individual life strategy', 'process', 'micro' and 'qualitative methods'. Furthermore, the profession tends to be depoliticised and domesticated, and dominated by metaphysics and instrumentality at the same time. Therefore, ideas and methods to strike a better, new balance in a long-term strategy for the discipline and the profession are called for.

Sylvia Walby, in her 'Contributions to an agenda for sociology for the 21st century', answers this call by raising three important issues. Firstly, socio-



logy must move beyond the traditional problematics of the industrial society raised by the 'classic canon', of Marx, Weber and Durkheim, and instead (also) look at new inequalities, especially the neglected issues of gender and ethnicity. Secondly, sociology must address the ongoing internationalisation, especially the increasing integration of the European Union. Thirdly, sociology must, in its methodology, stand by its definition as a science. It must hold on to systematic enquiry and data collection and not give in to 'relativism' and 'culturalism'.


John Urry, in 'The concept of society and the future of sociology', warns us that we might be losing our constitutive concept of 'society', whatever meaning of that concept we endorse, because we have not paid sufficient attention to the concept in relation to, for example, globalisation. Discussing the concepts of 'region', 'network' and 'fluid' as new metaphors, he suggests especially 'fluid/flow' as a promising new way of thinking of society, involving new conceptions of how 'scapes', 'space' and 'mobility' interacts with 'the social'.

Zygmunt Bauman, in 'Sociological Enlightenment - for whom, about what?', takes as his departure points Parsons' and the Founding Fathers' concern with the Hobbesian problem, or mystery, of social order as their major, perhaps sole, concern; and the fact that all science is not only about how things *are*, but also about how things *must* be the way they are. If the answer is (still) enlightenment, sociology, as a human science dealing with acting, knowledgeable, responsible social individuals, must deal with the enlightenment of people rather than of despots and states. Moreover, in these postmodern times, it must enlighten the human individual about 'the infinitely varied

collective entanglements of his choices and their consequences' to promote responsible use of human freedom. Uncertainty, plurality, ambivalence and contingency must be maintained in order to do this.

Finally, *Mikael Carleheden*, in 'Another sociology, the future of sociology from a critical theoretical perspective', assures us that we are not seeing 'the end of sociology' just because society is changing. However, to address the future of our science we must deal with four important imperatives: (1) The crisis of the welfare state, because of globalisation and problems of legitimisation, must be solved through further democratisation. (2) Sociology, losing the support of the technocratic welfare state, must look back in its tradition to renew its identity as a critical science, a diagnostics of social pathologies, rather than a servant of the state. (3) The present modernity, in theory and in practice, is only one possible form of modernity. In our criticisms we must look for 'another modernity' involving e.g. radical globalisation and individualism. (4) Another sociology of another society needs another relationship between theory and empirical research, and other methods of empirical research. Here we must go beyond traditional critical theory towards more dialogical methods.

The four main contributions represent four different approaches, and they should not necessarily be reconciled, nor combined randomly. They represent the fertile tension central to our profession, a tension which we should not only learn to live with but learn to use to our own advantage. However, at a certain general level they agree that the present, new society needs a new sociology with new priorities, issues, and responsibilities; new (kinds of)



theory, new basic concepts or metaphors, and new (and renewed) methods adapted to this new orientation. To pinpoint the argument, they even agree with Carleheden, that “sociology must renew itself to have a future”. Also, they believe that a new sociology programme should, of course, reflect this renewal.

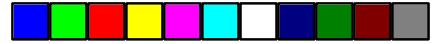
Still, despite the differences, by reading between the lines, as well as the lines themselves, and letting ourselves be guided by the concluding panel debate at the conference, we might conclude even further with the following points:

- The classic canon of ‘sociology’ (in the broadest sense of the discipline) is important, although primarily for orientation and inspiration for what we must do now.
- A critical approach to the study of society is important as well. Sociology has a mission as an enlightener and a ‘discloser’ in the social process, even so far as having the aim to preserve and promote human and democratic diversity, plurality and rights rather than to supply social technology for despots and authority to promote uniformity and duties. At the same time we must be aware, and call attention to how, to use Bauman’s expression, freedom strikes back as contingency when private interests and troubles are transformed into public issues. In other words, we need to reflect more on ethics as well as on values, both our own and those in society as well.
- We also need to develop a new conception of ‘society’ and ‘the social’ as it evolves out of the traditional industrialized nation, and even the welfare state, and displays increased internationalisation, plurality

and change along with new inequalities - be it ‘a new Europe’, East and/or West (Walby), ‘a social system of networks and flows’ (Urry), a system of ‘individual responsibilities’ (Bauman), or just ‘another modernity’ (Carleheden).

- The ‘right’ perspective’, the ‘right’ problem and the ‘good’ question appear to be more important than the ‘right’ method. However, we must not give in on scientific standards; on systematic, stringent and open data collection and analysis, by succumbing to ‘easy’ solutions such as illustrative examples, relativism or culturalism.
- The ‘traditional’ distinctions - such as subject-object, structure-agency, micro-macro, quantitative-qualitative - no longer seem to structure the discipline. On the contrary, the good questions and the new opportunities develop irrespective of, and even in the intersection of, these distinctions.

Obviously, a new sociology is not the same as a new sociology programme. The latter must be more roomy, flexible and universal and less substantive, deep and precise than the former. On the other hand, a programme must never be one of contingent, indifferent pluralism where everything passes in peaceful coexistence. Rather, a new programme needs representation of, and room for, several new, engaged sociologies, as well as perspectives and issues from other disciplines, so they can be in constant constructive dialogue in order to produce the ‘right’ questions and the ‘right’ design, and to verify and question constantly ‘sufficient’ documentation for the answers. In other words: it must be an exciting place to meet and discuss.



This can no doubt be achieved in several ways. The way it is done in Aalborg, so far, can be seen in outline in the Appendix, and this will become more specified and evident through practice in the years ahead. We hope, however, that this initiative will also inspire others to follow other courses, if not in their programmes, then at least in their 'own' new sociologies.

Jens Tonboe

Note

1. The conference as well as this special issue of *Dansk Sociologi*, is financed through a joint effort by the University of Aalborg (the Chancellor, the Faculty of social Science, the Department of Social Relations and Organisation, the Department of Economics, Politics and Public Administration, the Department of Development and Planning and the Study Board of Sociology), the C. W. Obel Foundation, the Danish Sociological Association and *Dansk Sociologi*, to whom we are truly grateful. Student of sociology Mette Tobiasen has done a professional job coorganising the conference and coediting the papers for this special issue.