

JANUSZ MUCHA
AGH University in Krakow

ŁUKASZ KRZYŻOWSKI
AGH University in Krakow

“Crisis, Critique and Change.” Sociology of Europe at the Beginning of the 21st Century¹

Abstract: Starting in the second half of the 2000s, we experience not one (financial, economic) crisis, but the crises in plural, the multifaceted crisis situation in Europe.

The previous, Geneva 2011, ESA Conference took up a very timely and significant, at that time, scholarly and societal, topic of “turbulent times,” in which we had lived for several years. The Turin 2013 Conference was organized in a slightly different situation. Global, including European, crises entered a new stage, but at the same time it seemed that there was a light in the tunnel. Old themes, like neo-liberal politics, economy and ideology, as well as the lost welfare state were very important for the scholars. Critical approach became a standard way of analysis of politics, economy and society, but also of political sciences, economics and sociology. Criticism was not only “negative.” For many speakers and discussants, the recent crises have been a chance to re-evaluate the former institutional arrangements and outline new, more flexible solutions.

Keywords: European sociology, the ESA, crisis, critique, social change.

The title of this essay refers to the theme of the 2013 European Conference of Sociology in Turin, Italy. This was not the first all-European conference devoted to the recent crisis.² It seems to us that this slogan reflected the lasting European and even global crisis (or, perhaps, the recent stages of a longer and more profound crisis) and intellectual reactions to it very well.

We are not going to debate the economic crisis of the 1920s, nor the continuous crises of the European welfare state and European culture (however, the latter topic was present during the Turin Conference and will be mentioned here), but will concentrate rather on the beginnings of the 21st century. What needs to be recalled, though, is the neoliberal ideology (gaining popularity in the 1970s) stressing the virtues of individual consumption, individual achievements as well the retreat of states from many social spheres where they used to be active. In the 1980s the US called this

¹ This essay presents the authors’ comments on the 11th Conference of the European Sociological Association, Turin, August 28–31, 2013.

² See, e.g., Mucha and Świątek 2012, on the previous 2011 Geneva ESA Conference on “Social relations in turbulent times.” That article also discusses the topics of all ESA biannual conferences, beginning in the early 1990s.

policy and ideology *reaganomics*, while in the UK it was referred to as *thatcherism*. However, seeming economic successes of neoliberalism brought about a collapse. The US housing bubble, which peaked in 2006, caused the values of securities tied to US real estate pricing to drop, damaging financial institutions globally. Credit availability declined. The liquidity crisis emerged in August 2007. On September 15, 2008, Lehman Brothers, a huge American bank, collapsed, causing a panic within the American stock exchange. In 2009, Iceland's banking system collapsed, which caused significant international ramifications. Many European countries responded with austerity measures of spending cuts and tax increases. In 2010 Greece, and to some extent other Southern European countries, found themselves on the verge of bankruptcy. The youth protests (“indignation movement”) lasted for several months, beginning in May of 2011. There was also a very serious political crisis in northern Africa during this time, which has significant implications for Western Europe and perhaps the whole world. The Euro-zone, and the European Union as such, were deeply under threat and it is hard to say if they will survive. Therefore, we are not talking about one (financial, economic) crisis, but of crises in plural—the multifaceted crisis situation in Europe.

The Geneva 2011, ESA Conference responded intellectually to the crisis. In their welcoming address organizers of that meeting stated that its theme embraced the most pressing sociological questions of the day: Europe's economic and social crisis which challenged both sociological skills and sociologists' imagination. According to them, “Since its beginnings as a scientific discipline, sociology has sought answers to the sociological questions that arise in different social contexts. In turbulent times like those we are living in, when social inequalities tend to deepen and social cohesion is threatened, research agendas are frequently redefined and theories must be adapted to cope with new ideas and new social realities. Sociological gatherings like conferences serve to challenge our conceptual resources and our capacity to understand and explain these social trends” (Torres and Cattacin 2011; see also Mucha and Świątek 2012). The atmosphere at the Geneva Conference was, undoubtedly, *crisislike*, and sometimes catastrophic. Participants of the Turin 2013 Conference were welcomed by the outgoing President in the following way: “This time there is no question about what sociologists mean when they talk about crisis. The European integration project has never since its inception been as close to a crash as it is now. Nor do we need much justification for the view that what now is needed is critique, a social science that offers views on how modern societies work, stick together and change” (Sulkunen 2013). The atmosphere in Turin was, however, much less *crisislike* than it was in Geneva two years earlier.

In this essay, we shall refer only to the substantive issues, putting aside other matters.³ What will be stressed, are the ways recent crises are interpreted. The content

³ We would like, though, to underline some internal issues of the RSA as well as one issue related to the societal way the meeting was prepared. Carmen Leccardi, from University of Milan-Bicocca in Italy, was elected President at the Torino Conference. The next conference is due in Prague, Czech Republic, in 2015. In addition to “European Societies,” the ESA will start the second quarterly: “European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology.” Charles Turner became its Editor in Chief. There were

of the main sessions—plenary and semi-plenary—will be particularly interesting for us, since these events gave the largest audiences a chance to learn what famous scholars (not necessarily Europeans) had to say about European (and global) issues. We will not be able to be equally detailed about other events, with some exceptions in the “meet the author” sessions.

There were two plenary sessions (opening and closing), both addressing the main conference topic. The speakers discussed different concepts of crisis. Let us begin with the closing session. Rajeev Bhargava, from Jawaharlal Nehru University in India, presented “The Crisis of European Secularism: A non-Western Perspective.” He did not mean the recent global or European economic crises and their ramifications, but discussed the very idea of political secularism and the extensive secularization of European states during the last centuries. Europeans have a large basket of civil and political rights that are unheard of in religion centred states, both in the past and present. However, two problems remain. First, migration from former colonies as well as globalization have thrown together pre-Christian faiths within Western public spaces, Christianity and Islam together. Second, despite secularization, the formal establishment of dominant Christian religions does little to bolster better intercommunity relations or to reduce religious discrimination. Therefore, the widespread belief of a secular European public sphere is false. The religious biases of European states have become increasingly visible with deepening religious diversity. Despite the secular humanist ethos endorsed by many citizens, European states continue to privilege Christianity.

The other three plenary papers dealt with various aspects of the recent economic and societal crisis in Europe. Mary Mello, from Northumbria University in the UK, was interested in “Finance in Crisis—the Neglected Critique of Money.” In her opinion, the last decades of the 20th century saw a privatization of money as the money supply became subsumed by the supply of credit. In her opinion, sociologists rather than economists should be at the forefront of the analysis of money and the consequences of its privatization and abuse. The critique of the nature of money opens up a fundamental analysis of modern economies and provides the opportunity to reclaim money as a social and public resource. Chiara Saraceno, from Collegio Carlo Alberto in Italy, postulated the “Understanding of Crisis in order to Assess Alternative Pathways.” Appreciating the role of financial crisis, she concentrated on the crisis of the welfare state, and the solidarity within nation states and between various European countries (particularly between the “debtor countries” and “non-debtor countries”). The solution for change in the direction of greater efficacy and equity, in the speaker’s opinion, depends on “active citizenship,” which, unfortunately, was not explained in

a huge number of participants in Turin who intended to present a paper (around 2,600), in a large number of sessions. Obviously we were not able to participate in all of these events. In some cases, our colleagues, Katarzyna Suwada and Wojciech Kowalik, sent us their opinions. We appreciate this help. In this situation of crisis, critique and change, the organizers stressed very strongly the issue of social responsibility, for instance in reducing the environmental impact of the event as much as possible and in maximizing the social returns at the local, city level, in terms, for example, promoting labour market integration of disadvantaged workers. The programme and the book of abstracts are available on the website: <http://www.esa11thconference.eu/programme>.

detail. All of these papers combined two keywords of the Conference: crisis and critique—but concentrated on various aspects of crisis. Critique was the main topic of the plenary speech given by Stephan Lessenich from the University of Jena in Germany. His theme was “What’s Critique Got to Do with It? Crisis, Sociology and Change.” Due to the ongoing European socio-economic crisis, critique has found its way back into academic sociology throughout the continent. At the same time, the dualism between so-called “critical sociology” and the “sociology of critique” has become ever more prominent. The paper argued for a “critical sociology of critique,” willing to understand why people, in their everyday critical practices, in fact reproduce the social order, inhibiting the social change which they postulate.

There were 12 semi-plenary sessions during the Conference, and 24 papers. All but one (“Moving forward on the Environment? Sociological Debate on Families, Consumption and the Environment in Europe”—10 SPS) have “crisis” (sometimes also critique and change) in their titles. Actually, not all of them dealt with any particular crisis, and some crisis-oriented presentations were very general and—even if very interesting—hardly touched on the more recent situation in Europe. An example of this is a very enlightening presentation by American scholar David Theo Goldberg on “Racial Religiosities, Religious Racialities.”⁴ There were also interesting presentations on the crisis outside of Europe (Michele Lamont on Brazil, Israel and the US; 01 SPS) or on the North Atlantic area (Bob D. Jessop; 02 SPS). The themes debated were very heterogeneous: activating citizenship (01 SPS), critical political economy of media and communications (02 SPS), consumer society (03 SPS), young people (04 SPS), firms and individuals on the Italian example (05 SPS), European culture and religion (06 SPS), modern healthcare (07 SPS), Euro-zone (08 SPS), arts, immigrant integration and social cohesion (09 SPS), and work and employment (12 SPS). We shall pay more attention only to some of these sessions and on presentations devoted to recent developments.

Pekka Sulkinen (the outgoing President) spoke (session 03 SPS) about the consumer boom in Western Europe in the 1960s and 1970s and its further consequences in growing debts that created new forms of poverty and hit the middle classes seriously, engendering structural changes in the labour and consumer market, as well as engendering the welfare state, which is, in his opinion, an instrument, producer and mediator of consumption. Growing social inequalities belong to the consequences of these processes. Sokratis Koniordos, at the same session, actually continued this discussion, only in a more empirical and comparative way. He concentrated on the uneven shifts in consumption following the eruption of the recent economic crisis. Uneven reductions in consumption (both on the individual and welfare state level) reinforce existing social inequalities and identities, and perpetuate them on symbolic as well as material levels. He also analysed the deep imbalances between such developments and the political aims of the EU unification.

An important subject addressed by the speakers during the semi-plenary sessions was the analysis of the crisis situation in Southern European countries. Vicente

⁴ The second speaker of this semi-plenary (11 SPS) did not attend and his abstract is unavailable.

Navarro (session 08 SPS) presented the political context of the current economic crisis using Spain as an example. He showed how the neo-liberal model is responsible for the crisis in Europe. The inequalities in income resulted in the economic crisis. Since the 1980s we can observe the decrease in labor income which led to a situation where people were slowly deprived of their financial power. This process has led to the increase of private debt and public debt in general. The problem of the economic crisis in Europe is a consequence of the fact that the EU lacks institutions which would function in the way that national central banks do. The European Central Bank (ECB) does not possess the power that could protect member states from speculations. This situation led to high debts which, in order to be covered, needed an attack on a social state (reduction of benefits and social rights—the guilt was shifted on the welfare state). This had a negative impact on the society but at the same time did not solve the problem. Navarro criticized the austerity policies of the Spanish government by showing where it was possible to find money, and argued that the cuts in health, education and social policies had not brought a solution. According to Navarro, Spain is not a poor country, but he suggests that the tax system should be reformed and should carefully observe who pays taxes and how much they pay. He emphasized that the problem of the crisis is not a national one, but a class problem. The example of Greece shows that the root of the conflict cannot be described as the conflict between Greece and Germany but rather as a conflict between the German and Greek workers and the German establishment. At the same session, Maria Kousis analyzed how the financial crisis of 2008 affected society. She presented her analysis of the protesting movements. The units of analysis are the Large Protest Events (LPE) organized in Greece, Ireland, Portugal, Spain and Cyprus. They are organized by both old and new groups and attract huge numbers of protesters. All are characterized by similar claims and forms of action. Kousis emphasized the transnational nature of the protests which attracted a solidarity of people from all over Europe (including countries not affected by the crisis). The speaker concluded that despite the fact that the protests were rooted in the 2007 economic crisis, they were associated rather with the struggle for the rights of citizens and democratic values than with economics as such. Some of these movements will transform into political actors and start new political parties.

The situation concerning the crisis in Italy was undertaken by Francesco Ramella and Robert Sassatelli (session 05 SPS). In Ramella's speech, the crisis was presented from the angle of the low (compared to the other European economies) innovative character of Italian companies. According to the panel, the research presented by Ramella, among other things, concluded that the most innovative companies' feature is a large number of the so-called “weak ties” (Granovetter 1973) with other companies, both from the same industry and from related industries. Isolation and the lack of cooperation between enterprises did not contribute to growth and innovation. Sassatelli presented the results of studies on changes in the consumption of middle-class families in Italy, which were a result of the economic crisis. The researched families had extensively changed their approach to the management of their money by being more economical. In addition, changes in their eating habits were observed, as well as their approach to wasting food. More attention was paid to the amount of bought

products, and efforts to use 100% of available resources as well as to reduce waste were undertaken more often. These changing attitudes were also reflected in the education of children. The respondents admitted that they were trying to hand down these new habits to their children. The concept of the crisis and the need for efficient management of resources have become a regular part of the narration on how to run a household but are present in discussions related to broader social relations as well.

The crisis was also analyzed from the angle of European youth unemployment. Andy Furlong (session 04 SPS) said that in general mainstream discourse, a generation that experiences crisis in its youth is very often called a lost generation. It is also pointed out that the next cohort entering the labor market should no longer feel the effects of the crisis, and that the market should return to its prior condition before the economic downturn. The speaker opposed this discourse, indicating that the changes in the labor market may be much deeper and largely irreversible. Such emotions as: Anger, Anomie, Anxiety and Alienation (“the four A’s”) will, according to Furlong, be associated with the current and future generations, as the future labor market does not give a sense of security and predictability of income, and it will result in a significant increase of non-traditional forms of employment. People will be, to a greater extent, left with casual jobs. This situation will mainly affect people belonging to lower classes. His prediction is based on an analysis of the social changes that occurred after the economic crisis in Japan. The effects of the crisis deeply affected the Japanese youth, which can be seen even today, and can be described in terms of the four (above mentioned) designated “A’s.” Any revolution seems to have a low probability because the domain of the youth during “the time of crisis” is a withdrawal, and anger is not transformed into a political tool for change, but is rather focused on self-destruction. As stated by the speaker, anger is rather internalized than aimed on something external, or transformable into action. Metka Kuhar, at the same session, presented such predictions about the future which were different than those presented by the former speakers. On the one hand, she noticed some negative changes among the younger generation resulting from the crisis. She also indicated the strategies used by young people in the times of recession, such as a shift of the age of entry into adulthood (e.g. to stay in a family home as long as possible, extended time of education). On the other hand, the speaker saw a tremendous opportunity in the current worldwide emerging protests and the new movements of young people. In her opinion, these movements have a chance to make a revolution similar to the one which took place in the 1960s, although at a smaller scale. She particularly perceived the main “engine” of changes in the formal and informal groups, referring to post-material values which emphasize innovation and creativity in the transforming of reality. The economy of the future is focused towards the customization of products and services, “prosumer” and post-material attitudes.

Juan Diez Medrano (session 01 SPS) stated in his paper that the concept of social resilience is becoming extremely popular in the social sciences, which can lead to “abuse” when this notion is not clearly defined. Medrano presented analytical tools which allow for studying social resilience. For this purpose, according to the speaker, it is necessary to take into account the institutional, cultural and social

factors that determine in what way individuals and groups react to crisis situations. Medrano, for example, showed that entrepreneurship is one of the more common ways to deal with any crisis. Various kinds of experience (e.g. knowledge of foreign languages and other cultural patterns) obtained from conducting a transnational life increase safety of groups and individuals. Michele Lamont, in the same session, presented her conceptualization of social resilience. This is based on social recognition as a necessary condition for citizen participation. Lamont, by analyzing the response to the stigmatization of discriminated groups, emphasizes the dynamic changes between symbolic boundaries (including collective representations) and social boundaries.

“Mid-day Specials” events embraced 13 paper sessions and workshops. Among them, four dealt with crisis and/or critique. Two of them were devoted to the crisis within the European Union. The topics discussed concentrated on the Euro-Zone (Dennis Smith), communication and governance in times of crisis (Katharine Sarikakis), case studies of the lives of the recently unemployed people from Southern Europe—Catalonia and Greece (Natalia Canto-Mila), chances, dangers and challenges of the further economic and cultural, as opposed to “strictly legal,” integration, the “occupy movement” (Max Haller) and a new repertoire of mass resistance (Lev Luis Grinberg). According to Grinberg, the neo-liberal policy has eroded social solidarity and has propagated individualism as a basic strategy for life. The protests involving the occupation of public spaces are, in the author’s opinion, an additional basis for building values based on social solidarity, democracy and empowerment for each citizen. Grinberg recalled the description of this type of protest from several countries, presenting the positive changes that have not only been created for the matter of that fight, but also for the sake of the community. One of these specials discussed the topic of “universities in crisis.” There was one general paper by John Holmwood on the neoliberal knowledge regime, public higher education and the future of the social sciences, as well as a case study by Massimiliano Vaira on a decade of disruption: The Italian university system in the neoliberal era. The last issue, “universities in crisis,” is obviously not only significant to European scholars, as it is also a global problem. A few years ago the International Sociological Association started a public, on-going debate on this topic, available on the website: <http://www.isa-sociology.org/universities-in-crisis>. Holmwood is one of the most active authors on that blog.

The “Author Meets Critics” sessions belonged to the “Mid-day Specials.” It seemed that the newest books on the crises, change and critique would dominate, however, this was not the case. The publishers displayed some new books on these topics, among them a book by Ulrich Beck (2012) on the world in turmoil, Costas Douzina’s (2013) book on crisis and resistance in Greece and Alain Touraine’s (2013) book on the post-crisis perspectives. Although most of these sessions were not focused on books that directly referred to the theme of the Conference, the notions of crisis, criticism and change were present. For example, a book edited by Robert Miller and Graham Day (2012) is based on the idea that Europe is a dynamic project where crisis is still present. Assunta Sarlo and Francesca Zajczyk (2012) analyzed the women’s movement in Italy in their book, particularly focusing on the presence of women

in political institutions. Critical topics were also present in the meeting with Marco Caselli, who critically examined the analytical tools used in the study of globalization.

Some of the 36 well-established Research Networks and 12 of the less permanent Research Streams deal exactly with transformations, crises and critique. Examples of this are: “Critical Political Economy” (RN 06), “Disaster, Conflict and Social Crisis” (RN 08), “Economic Sociology” (RN 09), “Work, Employment and Industrial Relations” (RN 17), “Sociology of Risk and Uncertainty” (RN 22), “The EU Zone Crisis—Critique and Changes” (RS 00), “Capitalist Crises, Critique of Growth and the Perspectives for a Post-Growth Society” (RS 02), and “Power and Communication in Time of Crisis” (RS 10). However, some do not. Among them is the RN 29 on “Social Theory.” Interestingly, four years earlier, the programme committee of the 9th ESA Conference in Lisbon organized a semi-plenary session under the title “Theory trends and debates: What theory do we need,” where they featured sociology of individuals and critical theory. At that time, in the opinion of one of the invited discussants, critical theory did not seem to be a leading trend in contemporary sociology according to the research practice, publications and papers presented at conference (Mucha 2010). Today, the network dealing with social theory organized six sessions devoted to critical theorizing and to theorizing during the crisis. In other research networks and streams we have also found sessions on crisis and critique. Examples are: “Ageing in the Crisis” (RN 01), “Critical Perspectives on Ageing” (RN 01), “Cultures in Crisis” (RN 07), “Citizens’ Resilience in Times of Crisis” (RN 32), “Crisis and Change in Northern Europe: From Nordic Welfare Systems to Welfare Chauvinism” (RN 32) and “Urban Sociology and Public Spaces in Times of Crisis and Change” (RS 12). In our opinion, the number of these sessions, the number of presented and distributed papers, and their content, clearly show that sociologists in Europe are still under the influence of the on-going multifaceted crisis, but have already started to theorize the possible post-crisis Europe.

Let us return, for a moment, to the published summary of the 2011 Geneva Conference (see, again, Mucha and Świątek 2012). The 2012 hope that most of the papers from that event would come out in 2012 or 2013 as articles and collections only partially came true. The previous conference took up a very timely and significant, at that time, scholarly and societal, topic of “turbulent times,” in which we had lived for several years. That Conference debated those broad issues both on very general (in plenary and semi-plenary sessions) and on very specific and empirical levels (in sessions organized by Research Networks and Research Streams). European sociologists devoted that Conference to the problems crucial not only for Europe, but also crucial globally, and which could have brought far-reaching and unpredictable consequences.

The Turin 2013 Conference was organized in a slightly different manner. Global, including European, crises entered a new stage, but at the same time it seemed that there was a light at the end of the tunnel. Old themes, such as neo-liberal politics, economy and ideology, as well as the lost welfare state were very important for the scholars. The critical approach became a standard way of analysis, even if it was not necessarily a dominant one, in terms of politics, economy and society, but also for

political sciences, economics and sociology. Criticism was not only “negative.” For many speakers and discussants, the recent crises have been a chance to re-evaluate the former institutional arrangements and outline new, more flexible solutions.

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Biographical Notes:

Janusz Mucha received both his Ph.D. in sociology and his Habilitation (post-doctoral degree; 1986) at Jagiellonian University of Krakow, Poland. He works at the Faculty of Humanities, AGH University of Science and Technology in Krakow, Poland. He is interested in minority studies, social theory, Central and Eastern Europe, social aspects of technology and intergenerational relations.

E-mail: [jmucha@post.pl](mailto:jmuch@post.pl).

Lukasz Krzyżowski holds MA in sociology from the Faculty of Humanities, AGH University of Science and Technology in Krakow, Poland and his PhD in sociology from the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences (2012). He works at the Faculty of Humanities, AGH University. His main interests are ethnicity, transnational migration, and intergenerational relations.

E-mail: lukasz.krzyzowski@agh.edu.pl.