

If a nineteenth century sociologist, a mixture of pamphleteer, positivist philosopher, educator, and newspaper columnist – were to come to life today, he would be uneasy and anxious about the state of the world at the beginning of the twenty-first century. His own Europe, where he was born, had just emerged from the ancien régime and all new European states, as well as America, were writing Constitutions for the first time, emphasizing national sovereignty and peoples' rights in the new political order.

Each state's economy was also basically national, although there were dominant imperial powers that ruled over colonies. Sovereignty was for the home country and denied to colonies, and rights did not extend to all, neither to the colonized nor to slaves in America and elsewhere. Still, despite these differences, there were great national similarities in politics, commerce and the culture of his times, and shared aspirations for the extension of sovereignty and citizenship. Yet the conditions that prevail now, in the 21st century, were he to awake to them, would greatly alarm him.

He had been taught, in the positivist, as well as the critical, tradition. He believed, in keeping with this tradition, that events were predictable and that there would be great progress and improvement. It is true enough that citizens had to struggle to take charge of their destinies, but they did so with the conviction that society was a perfectible and progressive democracy. Today's democracies bear little resemblance to those he knows.

That said, he would like the technological advances of today even though he would be a bit frightened of their speed, their efficiency, and, most of all, their impersonality. Our friend would find the phone, the high-speed trains, the highways, and the airplane to be more controlling than the technologies that he knew. In his first incarnation, he had lived in Paris, which he considered to be the height of tolerance and cosmopolitanism. He had even gone to Rome once, and it took three days to go there. His intellectual life was conditioned by geography, even though he could read English and German and knew his foreign colleagues through their publications. The world of professional congresses and meetings had not yet developed. The Internet – the tool that creates proximity and immediacy, collapsing time and distance - was not even imagined. Were he to be reading sociological writings on globalization today he would be just as enthusiastic and partisan about what he read as he was about the sociological writings on justice and equality, which engaged him in the nineteenth century.

Yet the world that he knew had fundamentally changed. In the twenty-first century sociologists' conceptions of justice and equality are far more modest than those that sociologists wrote about in the nineteenth century. He would be seeing today an international scene where the liberties of the richest make them extremely powerful, and powerful at the great expense of the large majority of citizens. And, a large and growing percentage of these citizens are absolutely marginalized through poverty and lack of political voice. The capitalism that he had been born into had evolved into a global economy that is cruel and vicious, while the national politicians who could control it for the benefit of the world's populations refuse to do so.

What would most sadden him would be the failure of democracies to blossom and grow, as he had fully expected. Betraying the aspirations of our nineteenth-century sociologist, most people in the world are still not citizens. He discovers that they are subjects. Political power has become subordinate to economic power, subjugating people and keeping them powerless. Even though some concession for the social welfare of the majority had earlier been extracted, these concessions were retracted by the 21st century. Nor had they ever achieved equity. The disparities in income, within nations and between them, had become immoral and obscene.

## **Sociological Congress**

ALICANTE, SPAIN, September 2004

Sociologists Without Borders was present in Alicante. In addition to members of the association at the meeting, there was a presentation, assisted by above all, sociology students. As explained by the president of SSF, the majority of NGO's go forth, driven by the idealism of youth, while being cautioned by the members of the older generation. (This contradiction, of course, has always existed, and did especially so in the 1960's, and always poses problems for mobilization for justice.)

The theme of the convocation, risks and uncertainties, convoked a reflection concerning a new world political disorder with its bellicose consequences, the extension of inequalities, the continued violation of human rights, and the environmental crisis. It is not that in the past there wasn't disorder, conflict, it is that now society is more informed, especially due to the incremental channels of communication. Above all, the internet informs with frequency, that which conventional mediums omit or devalue.

Sociology's role is to explain, as always, and it also has a deontological commitment to peace and human rights, which the current situation makes all the more exigent.

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