

Transnationalism and Society

35th Congress of the German Society for Sociology October 11th-15th, 2010 in Frankfurt am Main

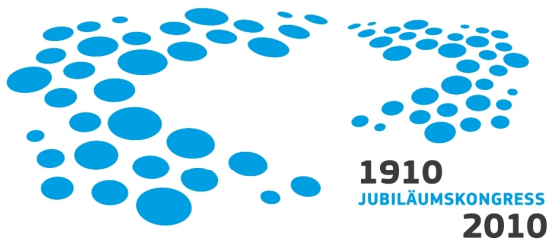
In October 2010 the German Society for Sociology celebrates its centennial Jubilee Congress. The establishment of a *German* sociological society in 1909 in Berlin must have seemed timely given the contemporary appearance of nation states and their economies. The paradox of the subject of sociology was already understood in the nineteenth century. On the one hand, since civil society emerged in the more or less absolutist states of Western Europe, it was possible to speak of French, English or German society and to develop corresponding National Societies for sociology. On the other hand, it was clear that society was potentially global, because trade and transport crossed state borders from the outset. For Hegel, the sea was the “natural element, towards which civil society must gravitate”. And did not Ferdinand Tönnies, one of the founders and first president of the German Society for Sociology, note in 1887 that the development of nation-states constituted only a provisional limit on the unbounded society?

Today, the “world society” relies upon various transnational orders, such as the global economy, technology and science, and even upon a global public that is emerging in outline from the global civil society. Of course, nation states and their economies still exist. Yet they have declined in importance as global actors in a “post-national constellation.” Contemporary sociology has recognized this trend and attempted to take it into account in the globalization debate, both at the conceptual level and in terms of methodology. The extent to which sociology’s theoretical principles, concepts and methods are focused on the transnationality of the social will be negotiated at the Jubilee Congress. The utility of distinguishing regional or national variants such as German, French, European, and American sociology will also be considered. These different national traditions of sociology had substantial significance in the 19th and 20th centuries, but it is no longer certain that these national differences can still be identified.

With this historical reflexivity the German Society for Sociology links to its roots by focusing on the tensions between regional, national and global identity formation at the heart of the Jubilee Congress. Social-theoretical questions are also connected to the often conflict-riddled sociological inventories and *Zeitdiagnosen* of various transnational forms of socialization. These questions explore an area already identified by Tönnies, namely the concept of the world society as it is and as it could be.

Contemporary processes of globalization occur in the context of a tense relationship between globality and locality that has paradoxically opened a space for the enhancement of local characteristics. These processes also occur within a tense relationship





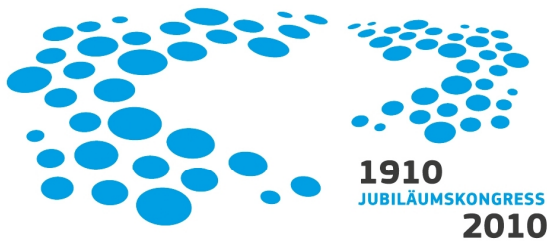
between diffusion and orderliness that favors the development of various transnational economic and political regulations. The corresponding “governing” beyond the nation-state comprises not only individual states, but also global companies and banks, supra-national organizations, and civil society organizations. Such transnational forms of socialization do not hinder the emergence of abstract possibilities for participation and involvement as well as the recourse of particular identity formations. The relationship between spatial and temporal localization is being re-evaluated. “Homeland” and “world,” near and distance vision, approach a coincidence of self-definition and thus allow opportunities for new foundations of solidarity and “post-traditional” communitization.

Transnationalization processes convert traditionally binary distinctions into questions. “Either-or” mentalities are replaced by “both-and” understandings. These processes occur in a space beyond national affiliations that is gaining prominence as an experimental ground of modernity. Today, the close proximity of urban cohabitation is no longer in the foreground, but rather the possibility to develop and maintain social relationships across ever larger geographic areas. Accordingly, places of emigration and immigration remain connected and influence each other within the scope of transnational migration. The matter is not one of one-way, ongoing relocation, but of the emergence of transnational communities and social “spaces” that begin to link and change *both* places together. The following topics structure the Congress:

1. Social Inequality in the Tension between Nation-State and Transnationality

Contemporary societies are increasingly culturally and socially diverse. Processes of social and spatial mobility within individual societies, especially among nations and regions, lead to a permanent change in the social configuration of all societies. The variety of intersecting and interacting types of diversity is substantially new, even for the democratic societies of the Western world. The process of nation building has proven to be a process of centralization, harmonization and standardization in the direction of clearly defined cultural, linguistic and social norms. Social inequality has been generally defined in these contexts as a vertical stratification or class formation along the lines of income, education and professional status. This could lead to the justification of inequality as meritocratic and performance-related, even when horizontal distribution patterns (along the dimensions of gender, age, peripheral-center, etc.) always played a role in the classic nation-state configuration. Following World War II and after the collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellite states, refugee movements, decolonization and labor shortages generated extensive migrations that will be long-lasting and contribute to the dissolution of global boundaries. In the 21st century the questions regarding structures of social inequality are completely different. The social position of a person or group is no longer determined solely by nationality, as one’s



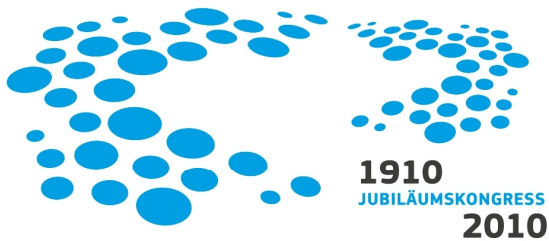


positions in the national and transnational spaces (or country of origin, workplace, and residence) are rarely identical. The nation-state approach is also too simplistic from the perspective of welfare-state policies. The following questions arise from this: Are structures of social inequality in the transnational world increasingly individualized, or are new groups and collectives emerging within them? How do processes of inclusion and exclusion that abet the establishment of social inequality develop? How can statements about insecurity and precarious situations be made in a transnational context? What distinctive criteria are structuring, and how and by whom are their applications normatively legitimized? What sociopolitical control systems are just in the transnationalization of social spaces? How are rights and responsibilities, access to citizenship and civic participation, defined within transnational social systems? What is the relationship of still dominant national welfare regimes to the rudiments of a European social policy and to developing global social and inequality orders?

2. *Global Economic Networks and their Regional and Nation-State Impacts*

For Max Weber, industrial capitalism was still the power of fate, which exercised a determining influence on the development of the modern world. Today it steers the international financial markets which currently have such a dubious reputation. The recent banking crisis finally reached the so-called “real economy” and led to a notable worldwide recession in 2009. Corresponding economic stimulus plans, the partial nationalization of the banking system, and the introduction of new legal regulations for financial oversight have resulted in a temporary increase of the importance of individual countries to the markets, however, this must be seen against the backdrop of the dramatic rise in public debt. The crisis of the social and fiscal state is superimposed on a far more dangerous economic crisis, the outcome of which will have a major impact on government choices and possible courses of action. Whether capital based pension systems can be viewed as possible solution to the crisis of the modern welfare state obviously depends on whether it is possible to stabilize the financial sector and to bring the credit approval process back on track. What this means for the global economy and the unhindered flow of global financial flows is now as open a question as whether the individual states and the European Union will work past national particularities to find solutions to the current global economic problems. The diverse path dependencies favored by different variants of capitalism thereby represent an opportunity to spell out a new relationship between “market” and “state” and to develop appropriate transnational problem-solving strategies. The global diffusion of technologies, educational designs, standardization and related legal regulations must be viewed in the context of the differing resistance of non-Western cultures to pressure from the global markets, which will also lead to an increasing diversity of responses to the current global economic crisis.





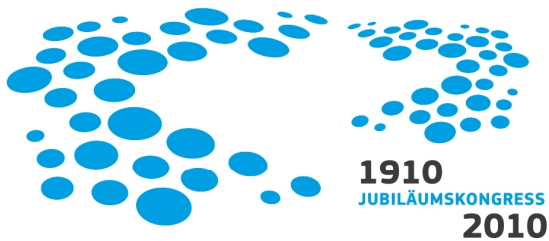
3. Cross-border Normative Orders

The emergence of transnational regulations and associated codification of intergovernmental relations is presently seen both in the European Union region and in the international community. The EU illustrates this tension between locality (city, region, nation) and globality (the continent as part of a world order) particularly well. The EU is more than an international organization, because it intervenes directly in the regimes of its member states. However, it is also less than a state. Since sovereignty is shared, but not transferred to a higher level, the EU is a peculiar construct that can be best understood as a “network”. The emergence of transnational normative regulations is not limited to the EU area, but has now assumed global proportions. Since the 17th century development of international law and the 18th century proclamations of human rights, the codification of relations between states has developed in several phases. This codification has been partly coercive, but also based partly on the peaceful diffusion of appropriate legal standards. The ensuing tension among individual national legal traditions must be considered, as well as the importance of lawmaking by transnational organizations along with states and private actors. The vision of a “global constitution without a state” may be understood as an attempt to overcome the state-centeredness of the modern constitutional concept, despite the continued segmentary differentiation of the world society in the form of nation-states.

4. Transnational Rearrangements of Gender Relations

In the course of transnationalization processes, legal systems, communication systems, knowledge and lifestyles are changed. This raises the question of if and how these developments affect one of the most important social policy categories, gender relations. In what ways are asymmetries in gender arrangements affected by transnationalization, for example in relation to the areas of work, family, education, sexuality, etc.? Or, conversely, are there social fields in which “gender” is the crucial category of transnational restructuring processes? It is not yet clear whether the changes attest to greater gender equality or to a “re-traditionalizing” of gender relations. EU-designed programs and policies that directly affect the production of gender equity (e.g. gender mainstreaming, work-life balance and anti-discrimination) have indeed at first glance produced rhetorical changes. However, it appears that in many member countries in recent years the gender pay gap has widened rather than narrowed. There are many visible examples of contradictory developments and consequences of transnational influences for gender relations (transnational family rooms, gender-typed transnational education markets, individualization of work and alimony rights, transnationalization of care and welfare work, etc.). Obviously, the issue is not just the change or persistence of gender identities and arrangements, but also the normative shifts and fluidity in the





evaluation of these changes. With transnationalization the differences within gender groups also become more visible, raising issues of intersectoral inequality. In the area of media representations of sexuality, one sees both the fluidities of heteronormativity and the exact opposite, its solidification and naturalization with the help of new technologies. To that extent must the entire contested field of gender policy within the political, social and cultural domains be questioned from the perspective of transnationalization.

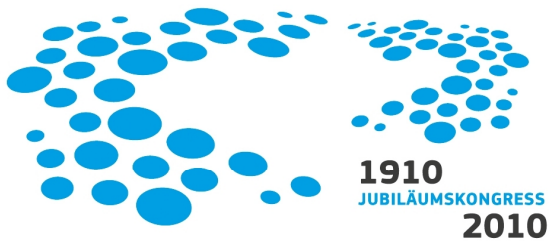
5. New Identity Formations in Transnational Socialization

Regional, national and transnational identity generation and forms of socialization occur today at the tense border between globality and locality. Ethnic shifts, the population density in the metropolises, and changes in the private life arising from prevailing circumstances due to globalization places enormous pressure to conform upon human coexistence. The increasing social and civic engagement for thematically limited set of issues is to be documented as well as a general reduction of obligation. These are obviously phenomena which point to corresponding shifts in the relationship between the private and professional spheres, and which leave behind the balance of the industrial society between work, leisure and private lifestyle. The worldwide convergence of consumption habits and lifestyles caused by economic and mass media globalization is only the flip side of a development that also leads to differing approaches to the management of modern life's pressures to conform. The growing importance of digital and electronic forms of communication, particularly the Internet, enables new types of social relationships beyond geographic boundaries and allegiances. The question of whether complex societies can develop community visions or a consistent self-image must be reformulated against the background of the loosening of ties with homelands and the emergence of multiple identities in the metropolises, and answered anew beyond the constraints of national affiliation.

6. The Permanence of the Crisis and the Need for a Sociological Zeitdiagnose

The Jubilee Congress aims to demonstrate the competence of our profession by presenting a variety of theoretical and empirical analyses of these transnational forms of socialization. This includes not least a critical recourse of our own professional history. Throughout its history, sociology has addressed the crisis-ridden phenomena of the contemporary society. As a “crisis science” par excellence, sociology has always been inextricably linked with the fragility of its research subject, the modern society. Its own history therefore offers rich illustrative material for the theoretical and empirical analysis of extreme social conditions. However, this should not suggest that something of a “balance of sociology” could be already undertaken. Given the circumstances, one should rather start from Max Weber's quip that the “historical cultural sciences,” which he later integrated in his own interpretive sociology, have to address the constant change





of “great cultural problems,” thereby ensuring them the typical intellectual characteristic of “eternal youth.” In this respect, sociology has repeatedly invoked “crisis” since its inception in the early 19th century, not only as an expression of the long term question of its own social positioning and mission, but as the natural consequence of the historical changes of the object of its investigation, always inventing the discipline anew. The self-reflection on sociology’s professional history is thus an indispensable component of a sociological *Zeitdiagnose* that respects current social changes as well as their relevant theoretical and empirical analysis.

Guest Countries

France and the U.S. are guest countries of the Jubilee Congress. The participation of French and American colleagues at this Congress marks the importance of both countries in the history of sociology and the emigration of German social scientists in the 20th Century. The participation of these two guest countries also illustrates the productive tension between the national traditions of sociology and makes relevant the questions of its current status through historical events and controversies within its profession.

