

The Complex Dynamics of Global and Local Developments

Topic outline

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It is widely acknowledged that we are now living in a period of ambivalent social change. There is a wide range of reasons for this view. They include the economic consequences of entangled financial markets; the rise of populism and authoritarianism; new forms of international solidarization; migration processes in various parts of the world often triggered by wars, poverty, and the climate; multiple entanglements of social inequalities, transnationally ascertainable changes in the world of work such as the trend toward increasing precarity; and digitalization with the way it is changing the forms of social interaction along with its potentials for social participation and control. In the public sphere, these phenomena are often discussed in terms of their “local” significance; that is, within the temporal and spatial horizons of contemporary societies organized as national states. For example, the public debate on the so-called refugee crisis has concentrated mostly on issues such as border controls and national sovereignty, cultural pluralization, and national integration.

The 39th Congress of the German Sociological Association (DGS) “The Complex Dynamics of Global and Local Developments” in Göttingen aims to highlight the current changes in society not only locally but also within the complex interplay of global, regional, national, and local dynamics. Sociology has a wide range of methodological approaches with which to address this issue. Depending on the specific object of study, they range from microsociological case studies, across large-scale macrosociological comparisons, to multilevel analyses; from the interpretative reconstruction of patterns of meaning to analyses of the causal mechanisms of social change. Each of these approaches can make a specific contribution to extending sociological understanding both spatially and temporally and can encourage reflection on the traditional perspectives and normative premises of our discipline. The Congress will pursue two goals: First, by analyzing the current status of the discipline, it aims to discuss which theoretical approaches, analytical instruments, and empirical methods can be used to assess the complex entanglements of local, national, regional, and global dynamics. Second, it aims to use examples from concrete research fields to illuminate this social change and the entanglement of different spatial and temporal levels.

For sociology, social upheavals have always represented both an opportunity and a challenge. They are an opportunity, because when the general public perceives them, there is an increased demand for sociological analyses. By combining theoretical reflection on the

everyday interpretations of the social world with a differentiated battery of instruments for empirical social research, it is particularly sociology that has the potential to make society more aware of different ways of looking at complex dynamics. In this sense, it functions as a reflective mode in society, as a location for and a form of critically questioning common sense. Social upheavals are also a challenge to sociology because of the particular need to find an appropriate dimensioning of spatial and temporal reference levels—that always also contribute to constituting the object of research. Hence, knowledge can be gained by, for example, examining local and regional phenomena in the light of transregional and global processes, or, vice versa, by analyzing global developments in their local microconstellations. It is also necessary to study temporal interactions between reference levels to be defined as part of the object of study—be they shorter or longer (or even historically comparative) research periods or be they different time regimes or caesuras. It is necessary to reflect on finding an appropriate balance between a broad temporal and spatial overview and a focused, differentiated outlook on each particular research object. A further challenge is to question the epistemic and normative premises of sociological analyses. Compared to simplifications through linear concepts, there are now various approaches emphasizing the complexity of global and local developments as expressed, by, for example, the concept of multiple modernities. By criticizing Eurocentrism, postcolonial studies present just one example of how crucial it is to lay bare one's own standpoint in order to make the specific dimensioning of the research object transparent.

These opportunities and challenges can be addressed through a multitude of approaches that should view the objects of sociological analysis in relation to a broad spectrum of spatial levels and temporal developments. In this sense, research can extend its analytical breadth by performing systematic comparisons between, for example, global and local levels, between nations or cities, between several time points, or between time regimes. Through in-depth analyses, research can also focus on the mechanisms that produce the entanglement of complex dynamics. Hence, the topic of this congress calls for sociologists to apply the full range of their analytical instruments to discuss the complex social dynamics on different spatial and temporal levels and thereby deliver a well-founded contribution to improving our understanding of the crises and upheavals sketched above and the way they are being discussed in public life. The DGS Board and the local organization team are looking forward to you joining us for a successful congress!